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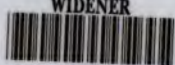
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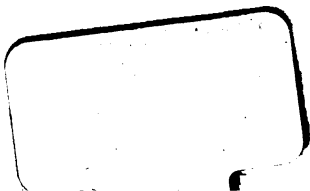


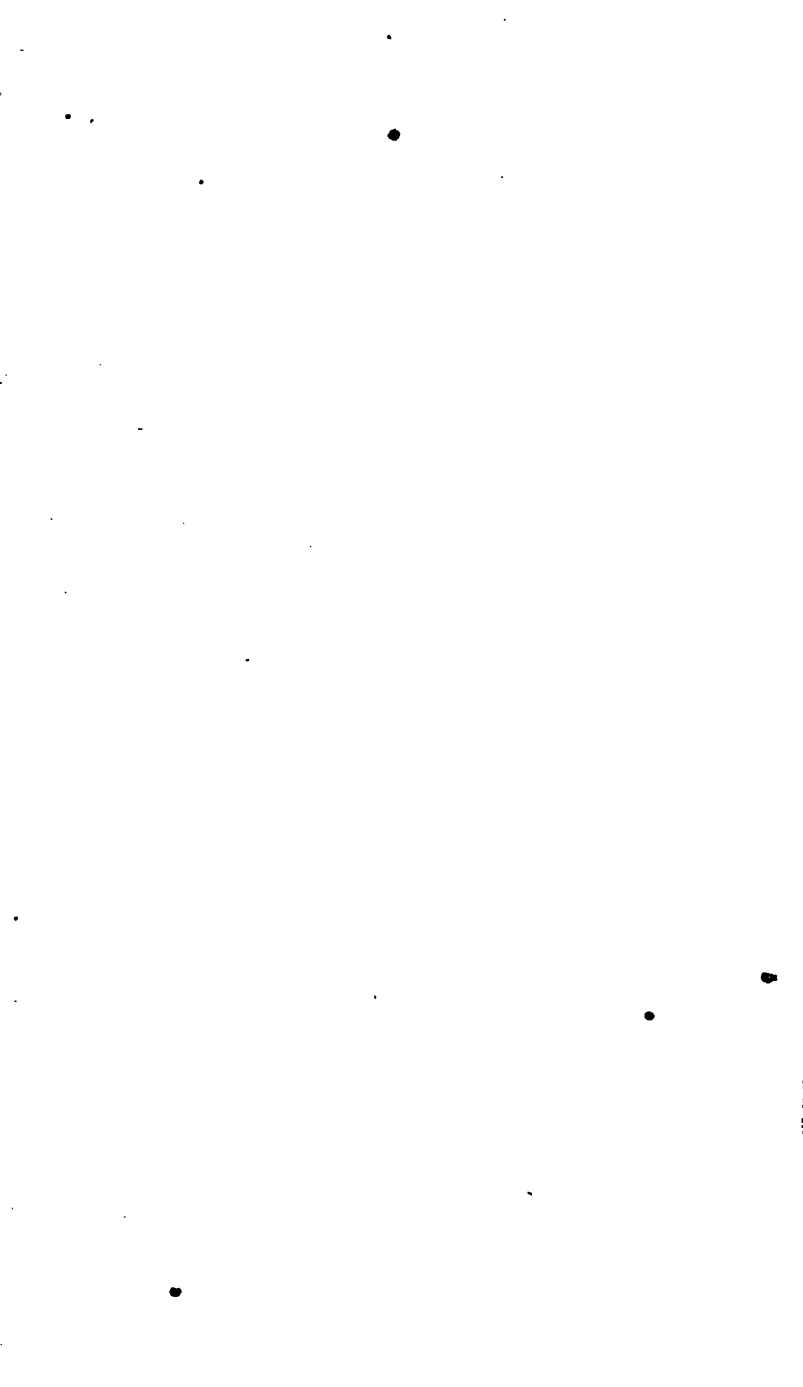
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THE
ANCIENT RÉGIME.

A TALE.

BY

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"THE GIPSY," "THE ROBBER," "THE GENTLEMAN OF THE
OLD SCHOOL," ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

NEW-YORK:

HARPER & BROTHERS, 82 CLIFF-STREET,

1841.

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THE
ANCIENT RÉGIME.

CHAPTER I

WE must now quit the cool outer air for a short time, and enter into an abode of revelry and merriment, within which, ever since darkness had set in, a party of five men and three women had been eating and drinking, and laughing and singing, and holding a conversation which, though the language and the absolute terms might be something more refined than they would have been in a *cabaret* of the common people, was in substance and meaning of a more gross, disgusting, and degrading kind than might have been expected, in any ordinary circumstances, in the poorest *auberge* in France.

Those members of the lower orders that ape the vices of the higher classes are sure to become even more disgustingly depraved than when they remain satisfied with the coarser vices more common in their own rank. The men and women here assembled were the lowest grade of the vicious followers of a vicious court; and there was mixed with the libertine slang, which they had acquired in their base services to those above them, a vulgarity which left their profligacy naked in its most horrible form. There was, withal, a merriment, too, and a levity, and an affectation of wit and smartness, which rendered the caricature of that abandoned court complete.

But it is forbidden to me in these pages to draw the minute traits of a picture so revolting; and, contenting myself with this general description, I must leave the whole preceding part of the conversation that was there going on unsaid, up to the moment when one of the party, with a foaming glass of rich wine in his hand and a licentious jest upon his lips, suddenly started and set down the glass, exclaiming, "*Ventre Saint Gris!*"

There are horses' feet. It cannot be the king at this hour."

"The king!" cried another. "Sot! Animal! Don't you know that the king never rides nowadays except when he is hunting? No, no, it is some of those *faquins* of the court. Go you, Merliton, and see. There, they are ringing the bell like fury. Quick, quick! get them into another room, and put those two bottles away. Monsieur Albert would haul us over the coals if he found us drinking his Epernay."

Great bustle and confusion now took place in the room, while the man they called Merliton—which was evidently a *nom de guerre*—proceeded slowly to open the door, with eyes somewhat inflamed with the debauch, though his step was steady and his mind was still clear. The moment the entrance was free, a gentleman, carrying a cane in his hand, walked coolly in, and was taking his way along the passage of the house without pausing or asking any questions.

Merliton, however, threw himself suddenly in his way, exclaiming, "Who the devil are you, and what do you want? This is no place for such cool gentry to march in, as if they were at home. Yes, sir," he continued, as the other gazed at him from head to foot with a contemptuous look, "yes, sir, it is I, your very obedient humble servant; but indeed, sweet sir, you have the advantage of me! Pray who are you?"

"Be so good as to move out of my way," said the Baron de Cajare, coolly, but appearing to be animated with the purpose of raising the cane which he carried in his hand, and applying it to the shoulders of Master Merliton.

At that moment, however, a personage with one eye, to whom the reader has been already introduced, passed the stranger suddenly, exclaiming, "Merliton, thou art drunk: drunk as was thy mother at the moment of thy birth. She was canteen woman, Monsieur le Baron," he continued, addressing Monsieur de Cajare, "she was canteen woman to the thirteenth regiment, and assured me upon her honour—and a woman of honour she was—that, to the best of her recollection, she had never been one whole day sober for forty years. So my good friend Merliton here must have been born when she was drunk. You see he does not disgrace his parentage. Now, Merliton, get out of the way, there's

a good fellow, or I shall be obliged to let the light through you; and a man with a keyhole in him is not so good as a door."

At these words Merliton drew somewhat back, and the baron passed on, saying to Pierre Jean, who had accompanied him, "This may be very amusing, but it does not please me. Show me into some room, and send me somebody whom this young lady has not yet seen among these men."

The baron was accordingly taken to a vacant chamber, and a light was speedily brought; but it was more difficult a great deal to find a person who had not been seen by Mademoiselle de St. Morin, for every one of the party in the house had contrived to visit her apartment in turn, not a little to her annoyance and grief. As soon as it was ascertained that such was the case, the baron ordered one of the men who had accompanied him, and who had remained without, with two other attendants, in charge of the horses, to be brought in; and, followed by him, he proceeded up stairs to the apartment in which, as he was told, Annette was to be found; the key being given to him at the foot of the stairs, for she had been held as a close prisoner, together with her own servants, since she had arrived from Castelneau. The apartment in which she was confined contained four chambers, the first of which was an anteroom, where the two men-servants were now seated. They both started up on the entrance of the baron, with looks which indicated a strong resolution to resist any farther insolence towards their mistress to the best of their power, however small that power might be. The moment, however, that they beheld the Baron de Cajare, whom they had frequently seen at Castelneau, their faces brightened; for any countenance but those which had lately presented themselves seemed to them that of a friend.

The baron instantly caught the change of expression, and understood what it meant; he accordingly held up his hand with a meaning look, as if to caution them against making any noise, inquiring, at the same time, in a low voice, "Where is your mistress!"

"Here, sir, here," said the old servant Jerome; "she will be so glad to see you, I am sure. She is in this room, with Madame Donnine and her maid."

Thus saying, the old man led the way and opened the

- door, and the baron followed with a quiet step, taking his tone from what had just passed.

As soon as she saw him, Annette rose, but it was with very different feelings from those which Jerome had imagined she would entertain. For a moment Annette did not feel quite sure that he himself was not the contriver of the whole scheme under which she had suffered, and, consequently, her first sensations tended towards indignation rather than pleasure. Various circumstances, however, presenting themselves rapidly to her mind, made her judge more favourably the next moment, and believe that the Baron de Cajare had no immediate share in the transactions of the last few days, so that her look of anger and dismay speedily underwent a change.

On his part, the baron, skilful in reading the human countenance, marked the first expression which appeared on hers; and, bowing low but distantly, he said, "I have come, Mademoiselle de St. Morin, perhaps too presumptuously, considering all things, to free you from the hands of the insolent villains who have got possession of you, and to convey you to a place of safety, if you will so far pardon me as to accept of my aid."

Poor Annette knew but too little of the world, and the tone in which he spoke tended still more to remove her apprehensions. She thought she had done him injustice, and replied mildly and gratefully, "Indeed, Monsieur de Cajare, I feel infinitely obliged, and can of course regard such an act of kindness as no presumption. Oh! far from it," she exclaimed, clasping her hands, as all the painful particulars of her situation came back more forcibly on her mind. "How shall I ever be able to show myself grateful enough to any one that will free me from these people, who are not—who cannot be, I am sure—the police of the realm!"

"The police!" exclaimed the Baron de Cajare, very well satisfied with the progress he had already made; "they may be the object of the good offices of the police ere long, but otherwise they have nothing more to do with the police than the man who was executed in the Grève a few days ago. Their object in regard to yourself will be explained hereafter; the only thing to be done now is to set you free."

"Oh! let us go! let us go immediately!" replied Annette, taking a step towards the door.

"Nay, nay," said the baron, with a smile, "we must pause a little yet. A carriage will be here directly, to bear you to a place of security at once; and in the mean time, as I have reason to believe that some of these villains are still lingering about in the grounds, I must go and dislodge them with my servants, that we may meet with no obstruction."

"But where are you going to take me to, Monsieur de Cajare?" said Annette. "Of course I had better go at once to Monsieur de Castelneau."

"He was at Versailles when I quitted it," replied the Baron de Cajare, "and thither do I propose to take you, mademoiselle. You may rely on my honour, I think, and be quite sure that I will place you in perfect security."

Annette would have fain had a more definite explanation; and the vagueness of the baron's words renewed, whether she would or not, her former apprehensions. She resolved not to show any fears, however, for she felt that her situation could not be worse than what it was, and she therefore only added, "Pray let us go quickly, Monsieur de Cajare! Every moment that I stay in this place is terrible to me."

"I will but ensure that these people have quitted the park," replied the baron, "and return to you without loss of time."

As he spoke he gazed upon the sweet girl whom he addressed with a look of admiration and tenderness which he could not repress. He took care, indeed, that it should not be disrespectful; but it revived, in a considerable degree, Annette's fears and apprehensions in regard to his object, and made her think with dislike of incurring a great debt of obligation towards a man for whom she had learned to entertain a strong antipathy.

After leaving her the baron paused in the corridor, musing for a moment, while his servant held the lamp, and ending his reverie with a few muttered words, which even the man close to him did not hear distinctly.

"It will be a difficult game," he said to himself, "but it must be played!"

As those words were never fully explained by him to any one, and as his actions did not afterward afford the interpretation, we must draw back for a moment the curtain of the breast, and, looking into the heart, investigate what were the emotions passing within; what

were the objects he proposed to himself; what were the purposes with which he came thither. It may easily be understood that the Baron de Cajare had not personally the power, if he had the inclination, of freeing Annette from the hands of those who now held her in a state of unlawful captivity; and though, perhaps, to those who are well read in the annals of the reign of Louis XV., and know the base subserviency of that monarch's courtiers, the conduct of the baron might give reasonable cause for believing he was base enough to lend himself to the licentious views of the king, yet such was not exactly the case. He had, it is true, been suddenly freed from captivity, had been sent for to Versailles, and had held a long and confidential communication with the monarch on the very subject of Annette de St. Morin; for Louis and almost all the members of his court well knew that the good baron was in no degree scrupulous in any point where his own interests were concerned. He had strong passions, it was true; and sometimes, indeed, those passions had been known to get the better of his interested views; but he restrained them, in general, by the power of a cool and calculating mind; and the king believed that the taming which he had lately undergone in the Bastille must have brought down any spirit of resistance to the level which was desired. The baron had listened, then, with the utmost complacency during his interview with the monarch; even assisted the king with an appropriate word every now and then, when Louis found a difficulty in explaining his own meaning; and showed not the slightest surprise, disgust, or indignation at proposals which were an insult to him, and a gross and horrible injustice towards Annette. But all the time that the conversation was proceeding, the baron was calculating in his own mind whether there might or might not be a possibility, not only of frustrating the king's designs, but also of making them serviceable to his own views and purposes in regard to Annette.

Strange to say, the Baron de Cajare really loved Annette; she was, indeed, the only being he had ever loved; but her beauty and her grace had commenced what difficulties, and opposition, and coldness had finished. As but too often happens, those very feelings of repugnance towards him on her part, which should have checked his pursuit, had only urged him forward the

more vehemently; and he resolved, even while the king spoke, to risk all that even the anger and indignation of a despotic monarch can effect, to obtain possession of her he loved. The king, in the course of their interview, had instructed him to bring Annette to Versailles, making a show of delivering her from the hands of those who had brought her from the south; and the baron calculated that an opportunity would be thus afforded him of laying before the fair object of such machinations the alternative of remaining in the power of a licentious monarch armed with despotic authority, or of uniting her fate with his, and quitting the court of France altogether.

Difficulties, indeed, he knew might interpose; but such difficulties had been overcome in other instances, by art if not by force, and he doubted not in the least that Annette's choice would soon be made, if she once became fully aware of the dangers of her situation. He had determined, therefore, to obey the king's orders to the letter to a certain extent, to take Annette to Versailles, and at the moment that she became fully aware of all the horrors that surrounded her, to present to her the means of escape by uniting her fate with his. He had, however, another task in hand, which he now hastened to perform.

Alas for human plans! In the very first instance, after the momentary pause of thought which we have mentioned, the Baron de Cajare accidentally destroyed the very last vestige of that confidence in his kindness of purpose which his manner and tone had at first revived for a moment in Annette's bosom. After he left her, the young lady remained standing in the middle of the room, thinking silently over what had just passed, and her meditation lasted longer than his, for his was only produced by a momentary apprehension lest his skill and cunning should not be sufficient to outwit the king, while hers had for its object all the dangers, difficulties, and anxieties that surrounded her. She was roused, however, two or three minutes after, by hearing a voice, which she well recognised as his, exclaiming in a loud and impatient tone, "Pierre Jean! Pierre Jean! where have you got to now?"

At once everything like trust or hope vanished from her bosom in an instant. "He is a confederate, then," she thought, "with the chief instrument of those who

have deceived and betrayed me." The next question which she put to her own heart naturally was, "Is he not himself the instigator of all that has taken place? Is he not himself now trying to deceive me with a hope of escape, while he is the person who has brought me into this situation?" The disappointment of hope and expectation, the bewilderment of discovering so much baseness and treachery, the despair of finding any one to deliver her, overcame the courage and strength of mind which had hitherto supported her; and, sitting down at the table where good Donnine had remained watching the countenance of her mistress, Annette covered her eyes with her hands and wept bitterly.

CHAPTER III.

WHILE this was passing within the little chateau of Michy—a place which had been privately bought by Louis the Fifteenth, with views and purposes of the most disgraceful kind—Ernest de Nogent had remained among the trees, as he had been directed by Pierre Morin, though the sight of the Baron de Cajare had tempted him, almost beyond his power of resistance, to enter the chateau, and endeavour at once to set Annette at liberty. He had but two men with him, however; the baron had evidently been accompanied by three; and, from the words which had fallen from the deputy of the lieutenant of police, he had every reason to believe that there were many more within the chateau itself. He paused, then, and watched, not knowing what was to take place next, and determined, at all risks, to interfere if any attempt were made to remove Annette before the arrival of Pierre Morin. After waiting some time, anxiously listening for every sound, he began to suspect that the Baron de Cajare had caused the gates to be closed after him, and that the police might be delayed by that obstacle. Under this impression, he directed one of those who had accompanied him to return on foot to the gate, and, if he found it locked, to do what he could to open it.

The man had not been gone five minutes, however, when some one bearing a torch was seen to issue forth

from the chateau; another succeeded, and then another; till at length six or seven flambeaux appeared before the house, and began to move about in different directions through the small space of open ground called the park. The enclosure did not, indeed, contain more than fifty or sixty acres, so that no one could lie concealed for any length of time; but there were apparently numerous groups of trees and thick bushes, and those among which the young officer was now standing afforded an irregular screen, which, by a step taken hither or thither, might be made to hide his party from the eyes of any one who did not actually enter the thicket.

The horses he had placed in a spot where they could not be seen, as soon as he had become as much acquainted with the ground as the darkness would permit; and though he doubted not that the rearing and plunging of his charger, when scared by the roe-deer, had attracted the attention of the Baron de Cajare, yet he hoped to conceal himself where he was till the arrival of the police. He was now not a little apprehensive, however, lest the man whom he had sent to the gate might be intercepted on his return; and he listened eagerly for any sound, while the torches wandered over the ground in parties of two or three, evidently in search of somebody or something.

Circling round him at a distance, the blaze of light was seen wavering here and there through the darkness of the night; now flashing broad and red upon the ground, now appearing and disappearing through the trees. At length Ernest's quick ear caught the sound of a step approaching; but at that moment one of the torch-bearers was seen to rush forward and throw his torch down upon the grass, calling loudly, "Here is one of them! Here is one of them! Follow quick, follow quick!" Several others instantly rushed forward, and at the same moment the servant whom he had sent to the gate ran up to the side of Ernest de Nogent, while the other party came on, chasing him rapidly.

There were two or three stout trees in front, with but small spaces between them, while to the right and left was the thicket; and finding that he must now absolutely stand upon his defence, Ernest took advantage of the situation with the prompt decision of an experienced soldier.

"Draw your swords!" he exclaimed. "Between

those two trees, Martin! Guard that open space on your left. I will take care of your right. Here, Pierrot! Come in here. Now, spare no man, for they are doing what is not lawful."

Almost as he spoke the Baron de Cajare, with four others, among whom was Pierre Jean himself, some bearing torches and some without, came so close that the faces of the one party became visible to the other.

"Down with your arms, and surrender," shouted the Baron de Cajare. "What do you here at this hour of night."

"I ask you the same question, sir," replied Ernest de Nogent. "Stand off," he continued, "stand off, I say, or you are a dead man."

The baron nevertheless advanced, with his drawn sword held lightly in his hand, as if he did not expect that Ernest de Nogent would attempt any serious resistance; and the young gentleman did indeed feel a disinclination to injure a man who seemed not upon his guard. When he had taken two more steps forward, however, the Baron de Cajare threw himself in an instant into an attitude of attack, and, well knowing that protection would be afforded him for anything he might do, lunged fiercely at the bosom of his opponent. Fortunately, Ernest de Nogent had not been entirely thrown off his guard: the baron's foot slipped a little on the dewy turf, and the young officer, parrying his lunge in tierce, took advantage of that circumstance to get within his adversary's point, and then, drawing up his left foot, he struck him a violent blow with the hilt of his sword upon the face, exclaiming, in the indignation of his heart, "Traitor and scoundrel!"

The violence of the blow overthrew the balance of his adversary, and the baron fell back, bleeding profusely from a bruised gash under his eye. He started on his feet again in a moment, however, recovered his guard as quickly as possible, and exclaiming, in a much cooler tone than might have been expected, "Hold the torches, hold the torches!" recommenced his attack upon the young officer with cold and bitter determination.

He was a complete master of his weapon, and was now aware of the slippery nature of the ground. His opponent, indeed, was scarcely inferior to him in skill, and was a taller and more powerful man; but his two

servants were attacked on either side at the same moment, and others of the torch-bearers were seen hurrying up from the various parts of the ground over which they had been scattered, as if to take Ernest's small party in the rear.

Pierre Jean, for his part, stood by calmly, holding the torch to give light to the scene of combat between the Baron de Cajare and Ernest de Nogent; and ever and anon, when he saw a good pass exchanged, he put his left hand up under his hat, and, scratching his head, exclaimed, "Bravo, bravo!" in the tone of a connoisseur.

At length, however, he seemed to think that the baron was not making so much progress as could be wished; for he shifted the torch from his right to his left hand, put the right into his pocket, and drawing forth a pistol, demanded, in a deliberate tone, "Shall I shoot him, monsieur?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the baron, angrily, "leave him to me! In three minutes I will kill him like a dog."

A sharp wound in the neck, however, at that moment, taught him that he must be careful lest he should be killed himself. But the sight of the torches now gathering closely round the clump of trees, and some of them even entering the thicket, made him feel fully confident that his enemy was altogether in his power. He continued the combat, indeed, but it was with a dark and treacherous purpose, which would have crossed the minds of few men but himself at a moment of such fierce excitement. "When they are upon him from behind," he thought, "and he is embarrassed with them, I will lunge and kill him;" and, in pursuance of this plan, he kept his blade playing lightly round that of Ernest de Nogent, ready at any opportune moment to put his base design in execution.

That moment was almost come; for a torch was seen struggling through the trees behind, casting its red glare upon the brown stalks and yellow leaves around, not ten yards from the spot where the combat was going on; and with the fierce exultation of nearly gratified hatred, the baron was holding his breath, and scanning eagerly the form of his adversary, calculating where and how he would strike him, when suddenly, to his astonishment, Pierre Jean dropped the lighted end of his torch towards the ground as if his arm were paralyzed, and,

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with a face turning deadly pale, looked sharply round over his left shoulder.

This curious effect was produced by a talismanic touch, and a few low-sounding words which Pierre Jean knew right well. The next moment the Baron de Cajare himself found a hand upon his shoulder, and "*De par le roi*" once more sounded in his ear. Turning fiercely round, he beheld the fine countenance of Pierre Morin bent sternly upon him, and, in rage at his disappointment, he had wellnigh plunged his sword into the breast of the commissary; but Morin, without any weapon, still held his grasp, saying, "Monsieur de Cajare, you are my prisoner! Surrender your sword."

"Sir, you are making a mistake," exclaimed the baron, furiously; "and this time your insolence shall not go unpunished."

"I am making no mistake, Monsieur le Baron," replied Pierre Morin; "nor am I using any insolence. Heaven forbid that I should to a gentleman of your condition."

"But the king, sir," exclaimed the baron; "the king has—"

"Given you no authority to do what you have been doing," replied Pierre Morin. "In one word, sir, I know you have seen the king: I know what directions were given you; and if you will take my advice, you will not compromise his majesty's name in any manner, but will refrain from divulging secrets with which he may have condescended to trust you. Take him away, Monsieur Joachim; his abode is to be now the Châtelet. Suffer him to speak with no one till I have received his deposition myself, and prevent him from saying anything that may be disagreeable to the king. Paul, see that none of these other people escape. Are there enough men on the other side of the copse? Master Pierre Jean, I think we shall hang you now. I told you the last time that you would not be satisfied till you had eaten the rope. Monsieur de Cajare, you had better go quietly, or you must have your wrists decorated with ruffles that gentlemen do not like. Now, sir, who are you?" he continued, advancing towards Ernest de Nogen, as if he had never seen him before; but then, approaching a little nearer, he proceeded, "Ah! Monsieur de Nogen, is it you? I suppose you have come here to

inquire after Mademoiselle de St. Morin. She is to be conducted to Versailles."

These words were pronounced aloud, and they had a strange effect upon both the parties who heard them. The Baron de Cajare, who had not yet ceased to resist the efforts made to draw him from the scene, became for the first time fully convinced that Pierre Morin had really received orders from the king; and, cursing the treachery and fickleness of absolute monarchs, he submitted and was led away. The heart of Ernest de Nogent fell at such tidings, and he gazed for a moment in agony upon the calm, unchanging countenance of the commissary.

Pierre Morin, however, advanced towards the point where several torches were still seen in the thicket, and in doing so he passed close by the spot where Ernest stood, stupified and horror-struck. Morin neither turned his head nor looked towards him; but, as he passed, the young officer heard a low voice say, "Not a word! and do not be alarmed."

Ernest, however, could not help feeling many an apprehension in regard to the situation of his sweet Annette; but at that moment one of the exempts demanded of his leader, "What are we to do with this gentleman, Monsieur le Commissaire! We have no orders."

"Nor I either," replied Pierre Morin; "you must let him alone. He has had nothing to do with the affair of counterfeiting the police. You will only arrest those whose names you have on the list, especially Pierre Jean, great Merliton and little Merliton, and the rest, with the three servants of Monsieur de Cajare. But there seem to me so many of these gentry that you had better call up the archers from the gate, and let the others keep all round this spot till they come. We have got them in a net, and must take care not to let them out."

"Oh, we have plenty of men, sir; we have plenty without the archers," said the man called Paul.

"Ay, but I must have five or six with me to search the house," replied Pierre Morin. "I cannot wait here all night till you have got these fellows out of the thicket. I have that case of poisoning in the Marais to investigate, and the man who committed forgery to interrogate, before I go to bed to-night. The lieutenant-general is ill, you know, so it all falls upon me."

A messenger ran off immediately to bring the rest of the police from the gate ; and in the meanwhile, Ernest de Nogent, bethinking himself of the situation of the two men who had accompanied him thither, addressed the emissary, saying, "These two are my servants, Monsieur Morin : I hope that they are not to be detained."

"Oh no, oh no," replied Pierre Morin ; "let them pass—or, stay, you three had better come with me to the house, and then there will be no mistake. I know that I can depend upon you, Monsieur de Nogent, for assistance in case of need. There may be half a dozen more of these scoundrels up at the chateau for aught I know."

"I will go with you willingly," replied Ernest, in a tone that left no doubt of his zeal.

But Pierre Morin still waited till he had seen all the archers arrive from the gate ; and then, choosing out two of the exempts to accompany him, he walked slowly on with Ernest de Nogent and the rest towards the chateau, stopping and looking round him into the darkness from time to time, as if to see that there was no one lingering about.

"There is something shadowy down there," he said to one of the men, pointing with his hand ; "run down and see what it is. We should be better of a torch," he added to another. "Go back and bring that one that is burning on the ground. Do not be afraid !" he whispered, in a low voice, to Ernest de Nogent while the two exempts were gone ; and, after waiting a minute for their return, Ernest thought he heard the sound of distant carriage wheels.

"I wonder who that can be travelling so late at night !" said Pierre Morin, aloud, leading the way on towards the chateau. "We commissaries of the police, you know, Monsieur de Nogent, love to know the meaning of everything we hear or see." He paused for a minute or two, then advanced again, then paused once more, and seemed to listen, saying to the exempt who came up at that moment, "Do you not hear the wheels of a carriage ?"

"I did a minute ago, sir," replied the exempt ; "but it is gone now. Shall I send back and see ?"

"No," replied Pierre Morin, "that were useless. If it be gone so far, before you could mount and be after it

all trace would be gone. I shall hear to-morrow, for Michael Brun and Angelo are on the road, and they will give us information."

Thus saying, he again walked forward, and in another moment or two they stood in the Ionic portico which we have mentioned, where they found another exempt waiting. Pierre Morin held up his hand, as if to enjoin silence; and then, cautiously lifting the great heavy latch which in those days was attached to almost all the chateaux of France, he opened the door without difficulty, and entered at once. A loud ringing laugh was the first thing that met their ears; then gay and somewhat licentious words; then other signs of merriment; then a health drank and responded to; and then a light and ribald song. Pierre Morin paused and listened, motioning those who accompanied him to keep back. At the end of the first verse of the song, however, he whispered a word to one of the exempts, who took a pistol out of his pocket and advanced towards the door from whence the sounds proceeded. The persons who were busied in such merriment were either by this time so filled with wine or so occupied with the bottle that they attended not in the least to what was passing in the rest of the house; and the exempt was enabled to peep through the chink of the door, which was ajar, without being discovered. Returning to the side of Pierre Morin, he informed him that the persons within were two men and three or four women.

"Then you two stay here below," replied Pierre Morin, beckoning the second exempt up from the porch. "You two stay here with one of Monsieur de Nogent's servants. You need not come with me. Follow me, Monsieur de Nogent, with the other two men; we must not want help in case of need, that would not do at all; we cannot tell how many there are up stairs."

He then whispered a word or two to the exempt whom he had first spoken to, and, having done so, led the way up the flight of steps by which, as we have seen, the Baron de Cajare reached the apartment where Annette was confined. Placing a man at each end of the corridor, Pierre Morin then proceeded to examine every room as he went on, so as to ensure completely that nobody could escape; and, accompanied by Ernest de Nogent, whose heart beat with no slight apprehensions, he went on from chamber to chamber till he came

to a door at the extreme end of the corridor, which stood open. This was the last door on that side ; and, speaking aloud, he said, " We must find some one here, at all events ; the house cannot be empty."

Empty, however, it proved ; for in none of the apartments up stairs was Annette or any of her attendants to be found. From door to door, from room to room, once more Pierre Morin proceeded through the whole house, but it was in vain that he did so ; it was in vain that, rousing the people below from their drunken revelry, he demanded again and again what had become of the young lady who had been brought there that morning : they either could not or would not give the slightest information concerning her ; and Ernest de Nogent looked in his companion's face with dismay, apprehending a thousand things in a moment, for which there was little or no substantial cause.

For his part, Pierre Morin paused again at the bottom of the stairs, again ordered the chateau to be searched by all the exempts, again cross-questioned the men and women who had been found in the lower part of the house, and then caused all the courts and other detached parts of the building to be examined. But all his efforts proved equally useless ; and in the end, consigning the whole party to the care of his officers, he walked slowly back towards the spot where the encounter had taken place between Ernest de Nogent and the Baron de Cajare.

As they went, he seemed to entertain some apprehension that the men might be too much for the exempts, and he consequently sent Ernest's two servants to give them aid. As soon as the latter were gone, he said, in a low and significant voice, " Do not be afraid, Monsieur de Nogent ; I doubt not that in this confusion the young lady has found an opportunity of making her escape. I am not at all sure that it would have been the best thing for her to go to Versailles, after all."

" The worst, the worst on earth !" cried Ernest.

" Well, then, we need not very much regret that she has got off," replied Pierre Morin. " However, the king will be very angry, and so you will be kind enough not to say that I said so."

Ernest promised to obey this warning, and something in the tone of Pierre Morin induced him to ask, " Will you not tell me more ?"

"Really I have nothing to tell," replied Pierre Morin, in a cool tone. "If you have any information to give on your part, pray give it me, Monsieur de Nogent, for I can assure you that I fear the king's displeasure in this business very much."

He spoke so calmly and decidedly that Ernest was completely puzzled; but he still ventured to inquire, "Is there nothing that you can permit me to say to Monsieur de Castelneau which may relieve his mind from the anxiety that you know he must feel?"

"Nothing in the least, my dear young gentleman," replied Pierre Morin. "As I have said to yourself, I must say to him, that I have nothing to tell of any kind, only that I doubt not Mademoiselle de St. Morin has made her escape; and if so, the count will undoubtedly hear of her soon. However, for the present, I think it is quite as well that none of us should know anything about the matter, for we shall all be questioned very strictly, no doubt; and, for my part, I am glad that I can safely say I have done my best to find the young lady here, but without success."

Notwithstanding all these assurances, Ernest de Nogent could not divest his mind of the belief that the commissary knew more of the matter than he chose to avow. But as he saw that no farther intelligence of any kind was to be obtained from him, he only asked, as they came up to the spot where the police were standing with their prisoners, "May I then consider myself at liberty, Monsieur Morin?"

"Oh, certainly," replied Pierre Morin; "I have to apologize for detaining you so long; but it was to assist me, not to restrain you, I can assure you, that I took the liberty of detaining you. Are these your horses? A fine animal that, sir."

Ernest was in no humour to discuss the merits of a horse; and, therefore, as soon as the other prisoners were brought up, and Pierre Morin intimated that he wanted no farther assistance, the young gentleman mounted, and pursued his way back towards Paris as fast as possible.

His horse knocked up before he reached the capital, however; and then, being at a place where no other means of advice was to be procured, he was obliged to pause till morning, though certainly he slept not one moment during the weary hours of night that still re-

mained. As soon as it was daylight and his horse was refreshed, he remounted and hastened on towards Paris, not quite certain that it would not be best to go on to Versailles ; but as a visit to the house of the Count de Castelneau could not delay him for more than half an hour, even, should that nobleman not have returned, he determined to turn aside and proceed to the hotel at the corner of the Rue St. Jacques, where he found everything in such a state of perfect calmness and tranquillity as to form a strange contrast with the feelings of his own heart. On asking for the count, he was told that he was just up and about to go to breakfast ; and, on entering, he found him sitting at the table, reading somewhat eagerly a note which he held in his hand.

" Ah, Monsieur de Nogent !" he exclaimed, as soon as he beheld the young officer, " can you give me any explanation of what this means ? Though apparently satisfactory, these words alarm me ;" and, at the same time, he handed the paper to Ernest. It contained a few words, written in a fair female hand, and was to the following effect :

" My dear Father and Guardian, I am permitted to write these lines to assure you that I am quite well, safe, and free from all danger and apprehension. I do this lest other tidings should reach and alarm you, for I have escaped a great and terrible danger : greater, I believe, than I myself clearly comprehend even now. I trust you may return soon to Castelneau. Your Annette."

CHAPTER III.

It was in the palace at Versailles, and in the private cabinet of Louis XV., that a party were assembled, comprising almost all the persons whom we have lately seen acting a prominent part in the course of this history. Those who were wanting, indeed, were certainly very important personages in the tale, and among them one of the most so was Pierre Morin himself. But, on the other hand, there were present the Duc de Choiseul, the Count de Castelneau, Ernest de Nogent, the Baron de Cajars, and Louis himself ; and we shall have occasion

to remark that, in the then existing circumstances, many of these characters acted in a very different manner from that in which we might have supposed they would act, judging by their conduct hitherto. This, however, was not unnatural; for men, in the ordinary intercourse of life, generally feel more or less under restraint from some of the particular prejudices or the conventional rules of society; and it is only when strong passions throw down the barriers, or when negligence suffers small traits to appear, that we discover the true character of those with whom we mingle in the world.

On the present occasion the king, forgetting his usual calmness and assumption of royal dignity, sat listening, questioning, and replying, with an air of anger and heat which must have been painful to any one who had a real reverence for the royal authority. The Baron de Cajare, casting aside the calm and graceful ease which he generally assumed, was now all eagerness, impetuosity, and rage; while Ernest de Nogent, on the contrary, was calm, self-possessed, grave, and stern; and the Duke of Choiseul, on his part, was evidently heated and irritable, and treated the monarch with less deference than might be considered due to royalty.

"Now, sir, now," said the king, speaking to Ernest de Nogent, "say how you dared to be in the park at Michy two nights ago, as Monsieur de Cajare proves that you were!"

"I knew not, sire," replied Ernest de Nogent, with that tranquil firmness which we have already noticed, "that either Michy or its park belonged to your majesty; and I think that your majesty will admit at once the cause of my going there was a full and sufficient justification for my being found in those grounds. I had heard, sire, that a young lady, to whom my father is under obligations for very great kindness and attention while he was himself sick and I afar, had been kidnapped from her home by a gross and infamous forgery, perpetrated by the most debased and villanous of men, and had been then brought into the neighbourhood of Paris by persons who pretended to be your majesty's police, but who were, in fact, the lowest of all those dark and ready scoundrels that swarm in Paris and every large capital."

While the young officer spoke, the king's cheek had turned extremely red and then pale again; but Ernest

had gone on, although he well knew that this change of colour was more likely to proceed from anger than from shame.

"And what, sir, made you a righter of wrongs!" demanded the king, fiercely. "Who entitled you to seek for and arrest these persons that you speak of? Where is your commission under our hand for thus doing?"

"Sire," replied Ernest, calmly, "I did not seek for these persons to arrest them. With that I had nothing to do; but I sought to set free a young lady unjustly and scandalously detained against her will, to whom both myself and my father were under obligations. I did it not, I acknowledge, from any consideration of general good. Although I might undoubtedly judge that, as the honour of your majesty's government must suffer more or less from such acts being committed, it was the duty of all your subjects to stop them as soon as possible; yet my object, sire, was to do a just and honourable act of friendship, and for that I required no warrant, sire, from any one."

What the king's reply to this bold speech might have been it is impossible to tell, had not the Duke of Choiseul himself interfered, not by any means to discourage his nephew, but, on the contrary, only to press more strongly what he had advanced.

"Your majesty," he said, "is not one to deny that, even had Ernest not been moved by any feeling of personal friendship in this matter, he was not only in the right, but was bound in justice to do as he did; to interfere, and even, had it been necessary, to prevent by force of arms any illegal act which he might see committed contrary to your majesty's honour and the laws of the realm. So say those laws, sire! So say your own ordonnances! You could have punished—nay, I am very sure would have punished him, had he failed in his duty in that respect. Your majesty is angry because he ventured into your royal estate of Michy; but he has, I trust, satisfactorily shown that his so doing proceeded from no disrespect, he being ignorant, as indeed most men are, that your majesty has purchased that estate. I will take care that it shall be better known, sire, for the future. May it not be as well to order the director of the royal domain to place some particular and distinctive mark upon it? But, in the mean time, I am sure your majesty will not only pardon my nephew for having so intru-

ded into the park, but will also thank and reward him for having interfered to free one of your faithful subjects from the hands of such a villanous crew, who, doubtless, by taking the young lady to that place, sought to do an irreparable injury to your majesty's honour and character."

The king did not reply, but looked down and bit his lip; and the Duke of Choiseul having said what he thought fit, became silent again, in order to suffer his words to have their full effect. The Baron de Cajare, however, did not permit the silence to remain unbroken; but, seeing that the king did not make any answer, he exclaimed in a harsh tone, "What your majesty may do in vindication of your own honour I cannot tell, but I trust that you will permit me to vindicate mine in the only way open to me."

"Sir," replied Louis, turning upon him sharply, "I am not aware that my honour is at all attacked; I trust that you do not presume to do so."

"Oh no, sire," said the baron, with an insolent smile, "I have as great a regard for your majesty's honour as for my own; and I beseech you to let me vindicate both in one upon the person of this good gentleman, who insulted me by various acts in your majesty's park, and you, by being there at all."

Louis paused for a moment or two, as if to consider; but all good feeling and kingly justice was not yet extinct in his bosom, and after a moment he replied, "Silence, sir, you are somewhat insolent. Take care that your own conduct be not inquired into too strictly."

"I humbly beg to say," replied the baron, in a tone of mock humility, "that for this part of my conduct, at least, I can plead a justification, which I think will acquit me before any court in Europe; but I would fain not name it if it may be otherwise."

As he spoke he fixed his eyes meaningly on the king, who replied at once with a heavy frown, "Take care, sir! take care! Now, Monsieur de Nogent, tell me," he continued, "how came you to receive all this excellent information, and whence did it come?"

"Principally from my father, sire," replied Ernest; "he was at Castelneau when the young lady was persuaded to leave her home by a forged letter from her guardian. He it was who told me the greater part of the events which I have now communicated to your majesty, and on which I then acted."

Louis was now beginning to feel—not, indeed, from anything that Ernest de Nogent had said, but rather from the words of the Baron de Cajare—that he could not investigate more minutely that which had taken place, without at once boldly avowing the part which he himself had played in the whole transaction. Had that transaction proved successful, he would have had no hesitation in regard to the avowal; but as it was, he did not feel inclined to acknowledge that such acts had been perpetrated by his command. He paused and hesitated, therefore, not with any purpose of abandoning the pursuit in which he had engaged—for, to speak the truth, opposition and disappointment had, as usual, only made him the more eager—but rather with a view of considering the next step, in order to remove the unexpected obstacles which were cast in his way.

"Your explanation, sir," he continued, addressing Ernest, "is in some degree satisfactory. Of course you know where the young lady is; for the report made to me by my lieutenant-general of police shows that she was not to be found in the chateau when his agents searched it."

"I was with them the whole time, may it please your majesty," replied Ernest; "I was never absent from them a moment; and the house was certainly searched in the strictest and most rigorous manner, without the slightest trace being discovered of where the young lady was. I should have felt inclined to suppose, indeed, that she had never been there, had not the people we found in the place acknowledged that she had. They said, moreover, that nobody had been there but Monsieur de Cajare; so that it is to be presumed her escape was effected while he was attacking me in the park."

Ernest's words produced a different effect from that which he had intended. He himself had not the slightest suspicion that the Baron de Cajare either knew where Annette now was or had taken any share in her flight, nor did he at all intend to instil such suspicions into the mind of the king. Louis, however, seized them at once, and asked, "Did she escape, Monsieur de Nogent? that is the question: did she escape? Monsieur de Cajare was the last person that saw her, then? From you, sir, we shall require an account of her," he added, turning to the baron.

"Sire, you do me injustice," said the Baron de Cajare;

"I saw her certainly, but only for the purpose of executing the orders I had received—"

"Silence, sir," cried the king, "silence! Let me hear not one word from you but in answer to the questions I address to you. Monsieur de Nogent, ask the page at the door if the fresh report which I have required from the lieutenant-general be ready. Now, Monsieur le Comte de Castelnau," the monarch continued, while Ernest left the room for a moment, "you will be good enough to inform me whether you yourself do or do not know where this young lady is. You see that a serious charge is likely to gather against Monsieur de Cajare, and I require a positive and distinct answer to the question I have put."

"Most distinctly, then, and positively," replied the count, calmly, "I have not the slightest or most distant idea of where Mademoiselle de St. Morin is, or what is become of her."

"This is all very strange, I must say," replied the king; "and, as I said before, I shall look to the Baron de Cajare for farther information."

"In fact, sire," replied the baron, "those who serve your majesty best are to be the most severely dealt with."

"You hear, Monsieur de Choiseul," said the king.

"I do, sire," replied the duke, "and I think I understand your majesty's intentions too."

"Stay!" said the king, "stay! We may find something more here either to exculpate or to condemn this gentleman." While he was speaking, Ernest re-entered the cabinet, bearing a packet in his hand, which he delivered to the king, who tore open the seals hastily and looked over the contents. As he did so his brow gathered heavily together, and he read the paper aloud as follows: "The deposition of Maître Pierre Jean, taken in the royal prison of the Châtelet, this 24th of September, 17—. That the said Pierre Jean did accompany the Baron de Cajare—and so forth: that the said Pierre Jean, on finding that the Baron de Cajare had gone up to the room in which Mademoiselle de St. Morin was confined, did follow him quietly; and, going round by the back corridor to the other door of the chamber, listened attentively to all the conversation that took place, and heard distinctly the said baron tell Mademoiselle de St.

Morin that he had come there for the purpose of delivering her from the hands into which she had fallen—”

“I think that this is quite enough,” said the king. “Call the page, Monsieur de Nogent; send a guard in here directly. Monsieur le Baron, when you think fit, by a letter addressed to us, and marked private, to make known where this young lady is, your case shall have due consideration. Offer no reply, sir, but retire into the antechamber, and wait there while Monsieur de Choiseul makes out an order for your committal to the Bastille.”

The baron bowed his head and retired; nor did he make the slightest attempt to escape, though there was no one in the anteroom when he entered it; for such was the strange sort of prestige attached in those days to the idea of the royal power in France, that an order, such as that which had just been pronounced by the lips of the sovereign himself, seemed to paralyze all those faculties which might otherwise have been used effectually for the purposes of flight.

Although the weight of the king's indignation—perhaps pointed by some degree of apprehension lest his secrets should be betrayed by his emissary—had thus fallen upon the Baron de Cajare, there were none of the persons who then stood before him to whom Louis felt any very kindly feelings. Even the Duc de Choiseul, who possessed his affection, if ever any one did so, had now given him bitter offence, which was not forgotten in many an after-day, and which was called to mind when other causes for anger arose between the king and the favourite minister.

For a moment or two after the Baron de Cajare had retired, Louis continued gazing upon the floor and biting his pale lip, while the Duc de Choiseul, kneeling upon one of the cushions, wrote the *lettre de cachet* for the king's signature. When the document was completed, signed, and countersigned, Louis rose, and, addressing the count, he said, “You will, sir, after spending this day in Paris—which I give you for the arrangement of your affairs—you will, sir, return immediately to Versailles, and not quit that town for more than five leagues' distance till you receive my permission so to do. Monsieur de Nogent, your leave of absence was given you for the purpose of visiting your father. You had better proceed into Quercy at once. Monsieur de

Choiseul, I have to speak to you farther, and in private, upon affairs of more importance than these."

Thus saying, he bowed his head, and the count and his young friend retired from the presence of the king.

CHAPTER IV.

WE must now return to one in whom our affections are engaged, and whom we have left somewhat too long already. We have seen the feelings with which Annette de St. Morin heard the Baron de Cajare calling in familiar terms to the man who had been the chief instrument in deceiving her into a situation of pain and difficulty. It is an old and common observation, that courage sometimes springs from despair; and although, from the moment that her false arrest had taken place, she had never yet dreamed of making her escape from a power she knew to be too vigilant and active for any such simple art as hers to elude, yet she now contemplated such an escape, not only as most desirable, but as possible, convinced that she had been deceived, and trusting to receive support and assistance from the real police of the realm if she could once free herself from the hands of those who so unjustly detained her. Unaccustomed, however, to act in circumstances of sudden emergency, with nothing to guide her own natural good sense, with no knowledge of the spot in which she was, and no experience of the world in which she was about to move, it was very natural that Annette should hesitate with alarm and agitation when she contemplated going forth alone and unprotected into a world where all was strange and fearful to her imagination.

"Donnine," she said, "we must endeavour to make our escape! That man is deceiving us; we cannot trust to him. If we could but get to Paris and find my guardian's house, we should be in safety."

"Oh! of course," replied Donnine; "of course we should be in safety there; but do you know where we are, dear lady, and which is the way to Paris?"

Annette paused and thought, and then clasped her hands in despair. The moment after, however, she said, "Well, Donnine, well, gather together what

smaller articles we can carry. I feel certain, from what I have seen and heard, that it will be better to wander through the fields all night than remain in this place. Make haste, Donnine! Make haste, good Donnine, or they will be back before we can make our escape. Hark! I hear voices below;" and, running to one of the windows, she gazed out. She there saw a number of persons, bearing torches, issue forth from the portico upon the little terrace before the chateau; and she repeated,

"Quick, quick, Donnine: they are all going out to seek the people that he said were lingering in the park. We may perhaps escape while they are so engaged."

Donnine shook her head as if she doubted very much that her young mistress's plan would succeed; but she obeyed the orders which she had received, and with Annette's maid and the old man-servant Joachim, who was called in to assist, proceeded to gather together all the things which had been brought in thither from the carriage on their arrival. Annette herself gave what aid she could, and was endeavouring to select those objects that seemed most needful from the mass, when the sudden rising of the latch of the lock startled her, and she gazed up with a look of consternation and surprise.

Her astonishment was not diminished by what she beheld; for, advancing towards her from the door, with a quick step and a look of eagerness and anxiety, was a lady dressed in deep mourning; and at first Annette, though she remembered the countenance as one she had seen somewhere before, could not attach to it any definite idea of the where, and the when, and the how she had first become acquainted with it. The next moment, however, there rose up before her mind, as if by magic, the whole scene of the little fountain and the cross in the wood near Castelnau, and of the lady that she had there so strangely met; and a light like that of hope beamed upon her from the past as she became convinced that the same person again stood before her.

The lady advanced direct towards her, and again, as before, threw her arms around her, and held her to her heart with tears in her eyes. It was but for a moment, however, that she now gave way; for the minute after she exclaimed, "Quick, my beloved child! I come to rescue you, Annette! But there is not an instant to

lose, for we cannot count upon five minutes as our own. Take merely what is absolutely necessary, and leave the rest. Any loss is better than the loss of time at this moment."

As she spoke her eyes ran over all the packages which good Donnine and the rest had been busily gathering together; but she still held Annette by the hand, drawing her gently towards the door. Donnine looked up and gazed in the lady's face for a moment, then made her a lowly courtesy, asking, "What shall I take, madam?"

"What is absolutely necessary, and nothing more," replied the lady, hurriedly. "Come, sweet child! come! come, all of you, as fast but as silently as possible;" and while Donnine snatched up hastily various packages, which, as usual on such occasions, were the things of all others that were not wanted, she led Annette on into the adjoining chamber, and the servants followed one by one. In the anteroom the lady paused for a moment to enjoin silence once more, and to beg those that followed to keep together. She then, however, instead of turning to the door which led out into the great corridor, directed her steps towards a smaller door on the left-hand side, which neither Annette nor her servants had yet had time to examine.

The lady opened it cautiously and looked out, and Annette beheld the top of a small back staircase, constructed apparently for the passage of servants to and fro. No lamp or candle was to be seen, but a faint light came up from below; and the lady, leaning over the railing, inquired, in a low voice, "Are you there, Gaultier?"

"Yes, madam," replied some one from the bottom of the steps; and the lady, exclaiming "Come, Annette, come," held out her hand to lead her down.

She felt that poor Annette trembled with anxiety and agitation; and she said, lowering her voice again, "Fear not, my dear child, fear not; there is scarcely a possibility of our being stopped. We are strongly supported, and have those to befriend us who can befriend us well."

Annette assured her that she did not fear, and she said true, for it was not exactly fear that she felt. Agitation she certainly did experience, and that in no slight degree; but it was more of a joyful than a painful char-

acter; it was that eagerness of new-raised hope and expectation, which sometimes performs the part of fear, in making the heart flutter and the limbs tremble.

Following lightly down the stairs, then, she kept close to her fair guide, while the servants came after, gazing round them at every step with looks of apprehension and wonder. They saw evidently that their mistress had some previous acquaintance with the lady who had thus strangely visited her; and the *soubrette*, who was accustomed to examine the looks of *Madame Donnine* almost as much as those of her actual mistress, thought that she perceived a look of intelligence in the good housekeeper's countenance, which she would have given half her little fortune to fathom.

All was quiet and solitary, also, till they reached the second flight of steps; but there a man was found waiting, well armed, and holding a lamp in his hand, which he raised high above his head, in order to light the party who were descending. On reaching the bottom of the staircase, a long, dark passage was seen stretching on one side to the right, and on the other to the left. In the latter direction it seemed to be terminated by a door, at which stood another armed man, who remained motionless, though his eyes were turned in the direction of those who were coming down from above. The lady beckoned him forward as soon as her foot touched the pavement, and asked him a question in a low tone, to which he replied a little louder, saying, "It is locked, madam, and bolted too."

"Come, then," she said, "come quick. Are they all here?"

As she spoke she gave a glance at the party assembled at the foot of the stairs, and then again hurried on, leading Annette by the hand.

It may seem strange to the reader, that, however simple and inexperienced Annette de St. Morin might be, she should go with the most perfect tranquillity and confidence with a person whom she had only seen once before, and who afforded no explanation whatsoever of her views, purposes, or character. So it was, however: Annette had not the slightest doubt; she accompanied that lady as confidently as if she had known her for many long years; she felt sure she was leading her aright; she entertained not a doubt that she was interested to save her from the evil hands into which she

had fallen. What were the sensations that produced such confidence, I cannot say ; but certain it is that it existed.

She went on, then, as readily and willingly as if the whole had been explained ; and passing on through several passages communicating with the different offices of the building, but without meeting with one single living soul except the two armed men whom we have mentioned, the fugitives at length arrived at a door which was open, and through which Annette felt streaming the cool breeze of an autumnal night. That air, and the sensation of freedom which it brought with it, produced the sweetest of all reliefs to Annette's heart. It was the sensation of liberty, it was the pulse of freedom, it was the breaking the bonds from off the heart. She now knew, even more than before, how much she had suffered, how heavy had been the weight upon her during the last three or four days ; for, now that it was removed, she felt that she could weep, and the tears did rise in her eyes, notwithstanding all she could do to restrain them.

Issuing forth from the chateau by a small back door, they found themselves in what was called the *basse cour*. No one was there, but the gate on the other side was again held open for them by an armed man, who followed them as they passed through ; and, taking their way across another little court, they came into a field, across which there was a path. It was evident that they were still in the grounds of the chateau, however, for Annette could see the outline of a wall bordering the meadow, and she did not feel herself secure so long as she remained within those dangerous precincts. The night was so dark that she could not distinguish anything but the mere wall till they had wellnigh crossed the open space ; but at length, with joy and satisfaction indescribable, she beheld a small gate in the enclosure, which they found open, and in an instant the whole party were in the by-road leading from Puiset to Fontainebleau.

It is true, Annette had no idea of where she was ; but it was clear that she was now free, and she did weep right heartily. Not twenty yards from the gate stood a carriage, with a coachman and two other men on foot holding some horses, and towards the coach the lady led her tenderly forward, whispering, " You are safe, dear child ! You are safe ! "

Everything now passed easily and rapidly: Annette took her place in the vehicle, the lady seated herself by her side; the two women servants also found room, and the men occupied a place on the outside. The armed servants who had come with the lady herself mounted the horses which were standing near, and without any word being given, as soon as the door was closed the carriage began to move forward at as rapid a rate as the nature of the road would permit.

Annette was still weeping; but she felt the arm of her fair companion cast around her, and her hand pressed tenderly in that soft hand which had guided her from the dangerous abode in which she had been placed, while the sweet, melancholy voice of her who had taken so strange an interest in her fate whispered tenderly, anxiously, in her ear, "You are safe, dear Annette; you are safe. It is for this moment that I have lived so long."

There might be a thousand things that Annette would have liked to ask; there might be a thousand hopes, and anxieties, and expectations which required satisfaction; but she felt it was not a moment to make inquiries of any kind, especially as she was not alone with the lady who had set her free.

For more than two hours the carriage rolled on rapidly, and then came a momentary pause while fresh horses were put on, after which it began to move forward at the same pace, and did not stop for nearly three hours more. Again the horses were changed, and again for an hour and a half they proceeded on their way, till at length, by some faint streaks of light that began to appear in the eastern sky, Annette perceived a long avenue of trees, a river, and a chateau at some short distance. In ten minutes more they drove into the court of the mansion itself. The whole household seemed to be up and watching. The great doors at the top of a flight of steps were thrown open, and a blaze of cheerful light came forth from the vestibule. The lady led Annette on by the hand up those steps and through the hall, into a large and magnificent saloon, where some light refreshments were laid out.

The walls of the room were wainscoted with black oak, without any other ornament whatsoever except the rich carving of the cornices and mouldings; but in the centre of one of the panels was a small portrait,

in a thick, heavy frame. To it the lady led up Annette at once, and without a word pointed to the picture with her hand. It was beautifully executed, and represented a gentleman in a military dress in the act of mounting his horse. He seemed to be taking leave of some one, and looked full into the room, while his left hand was represented gracefully waving his hat and plume with an expression of joy and buoyant happiness which it is difficult to describe.

As soon as she saw it, Annette put her hand to her brow, exclaiming, "I have seen that before—I have seen that before at Castelneau! I have seen it, and know it well; for I have looked at it for many an hour. Oh, what a countenance! Oh, what a look!"

The lady cast her arms around her, bent down her head upon Annette's shoulder, and wept bitterly. Whether it was the sympathy with grief that is in every fine and affectionate human heart, or some of those many latent causes, those fine and mysterious links between being and being, which never have been, and perhaps never will be explained; which set idle metaphysics altogether at fault, and tell us, perhaps, as much as we can ever know in this world of the workings of the immaterial spirit within us, and of its communion with other spirits: whether it proceeded from any of these causes, from sources more deep and inexplicable still, or from others more plain and apparent, I cannot tell, but Annette saw not the grief of the lady unmoved, looked not upon that picture without strong emotion herself, and, giving way to all she felt, she too bowed down her head and mingled her tears with those of her companion.

They were not allowed a long space of time to indulge in such emotions; for one of the servants who had accompanied the carriage entered the room the moment after, and, approaching the lady with a respectful air, whispered a few words to her in a low voice.

The lady started and put her hand to her brow. "Indeed!" she said, "indeed! How far did he come?"

"Half way through the second stage, madam," replied the servant.

"That is unfortunate," said the lady, "most unfortunate. Dearest Annette, we have not yet found repose; but, at all events, we are a long way in advance, and we will not suffer them to succeed, no, not if we should

quit France. Ask no questions, my sweet child, but take some refreshment, then three hours of repose, and then let us onward to whatever fate may lie before us."

CHAPTER V.

WE must now for a time return to the chateau of Michy, and to the back staircase and small passages through which Annette took her way in making her escape. Those passages, as we have said, were deserted by every one as she went through them; not a human being presented itself; for the door which led to the kitchen of the chateau, always an important and busy quarter of a French house, was that which we have seen guarded with so much care, and which the servant pronounced to be locked when he quitted it. The other offices past which Annette's course was directed were merely sculleries, pantries, larders, and places of a similar description; and all was silent and dull as the grave as long as the lady and her companions were on their way through them. The moment, however, that they were gone, from underneath a sort of table or dresser in one of the sculleries crept out a small but well-formed boy, apparently not more than eight or nine years of age, but in reality considerably past his fourteenth year. He was dressed in the greasy and lowly garb of a *marmiton*, the lowest of all the culinary officers of a French house; but there was an air of shrewd and malicious penetration in the boy's eyes, which spoke a spirit well calculated to succeed in other and more dangerous employments than the somewhat warm but innocent occupations of the kitchen.

The moment that he came forth he burst into a low, disagreeable, half-suppressed laugh; then looked sharply and keenly round him, as if afraid that somebody might be lingering near to mark his merriment. That glance, however, satisfied him that he was alone; and then he chuckled again and spoke to himself, seeming to enjoy the business in which he was engaged very highly. "Ha, ha, ha!" he said, "they shall see who will be *marmiton* much longer. Yon great greasy-liver-

ed cook shall beat me no more with his ladle as if I were a turnspit dog. Not he, forsooth! not he. Nor that great wild bully Merlton kick me along the passage like a ball. Ay! if I was such a fool as my companion Jonah now, I should go and tell those scavengers of court filth what I have seen; but I am no such ass as that. I'll put my money in my own sack, and soon see where they carry yon pretty piece of pastry. The king will give a rare sum for tidings of her journey; and while they are all drinking and quarrelling together and letting her escape, I will make free with the horses in the stable, and away after her to give notice of her course: trust me for dodging the hare back to her form."

Thus saying, the *marmiton*, with another of his low, disagreeable laughs, crept quietly out by the same door through which Annette had made her exit, and looked shrewdly through the darkness after her and her companions.

The path which they followed was, like every other path on earth, winding and tortuous. We have something of the serpent in us all, which, alas! never allows us to go straight forward to our object, even if it be from one corner of a field to another. The *marmiton*, however, who knew the windings of the path by old experience, took a shorter way through the grass, and, as soon as he had seen Annette and her companions safely in the coach, he sprang with a light bound on the top of the wall, indulging in one of his triumphant chuckles, which it seems called the attention of the principal servant who attended the carriage. Running along with the agility of a squirrel upon the eminence which he had attained, the boy almost kept pace with the vehicle that bore Annette till he reached the end of the wall, where there appeared a low building with a little court and a gate leading out upon the road. This building was in fact a stable, in which the gentry whom we have seen revelling at the chateau kept the horses which served to carry them to and fro upon their various discreditable expeditions. One of these horses was soon brought forth by the boy, saddled and equipped; and, although the stirrups could not be brought up sufficiently to suit the shortness of his legs, yet he contrived to make himself a good seat by thrusting his feet into the leathers, and thus sallied forth in pursuit of the carriage.

For thirty miles he kept up with it well, his weight being so light as in no degree to fatigue the horse. The vehicle was now making its way towards the Beauvoisis, having left Paris on one side, and following the direction of Chantilly and Clermont, and the boy was obliged to slacken his pace, though not to abandon the pursuit. He kept the coach in view, indeed, till it reached the last place where it changed horses, and there suffering it to go on while he himself paused to give his own charger some sort of refreshment, he made many ingenious inquiries as to the direction which the carriage had taken, and who was the proprietor thereof. He soon discovered or suspected that the two horseboys, who were the only persons up, had been instructed to mislead him; and, indeed, there was a jocular sort of wink of the eye while they answered his questions which might well create such an impression. The name that they gave in reply to his inquiries was evidently a false one, and certainly did not deceive him; and the direction they told him the carriage was about to take he concluded might be wrong also, though he did not feel quite so sure of that. Shrewd beyond his years, and experienced in every minor sort of trickery, he watched as well as he could by the dim light the countenances of those with whom he spoke. He judged, and judged rightly, that they suspected him of reading their replies the reverse way, and he imagined that they might therefore tell him what was right in one particular in order to cheat him the more surely. He resolved, therefore, to be upon his guard; and though he went on fast wherever there were no carriage-paths to the right or left, he stopped at each turning, and examined accurately whether fresh traces of wheels and horses' feet were to be discovered. Thus he pursued his plan successfully, and did not again stop till he had traced the vehicle into the gates of the chateau where we have seen Annette take refuge.

In the village opposite to the gates of that building he paused for two or three hours in order to refresh his horse, and there, by inquiries, he easily ascertained what was the name of the mansion. Satisfied with this information, he rode slowly back on the way to Versailles, and, presenting himself at the palace, demanded boldly to speak with the king.

The Swiss to whom he addressed himself laughed

him to scorn, saying, "Get away, you greasy rascal; lion; do you think the king speaks with such dirty young vagabonds as you are? Why, he would not get the smell of pots and kettles out of his nose for a month. Get away, get away, I tell you. I would make my cane fly about your shoulders if I were not afraid that it would get befouled by such a dirty acquaintance."

The boy was not a little disappointed, but, nevertheless, he was not driven to despair. Being determined to gain his point, perfectly unscrupulous as to means, and seeing what was the obstacle which lay in his way, he took himself back to Paris without delay, and there prepared to supply the means which were wanting by the unceremonious sale of the horse which he had borrowed from the stables at Michy.

In the good city of Paris, rogues of all kinds, sorts, and descriptions abound, and ever have abounded. The harvest of such gentry, then, was not at all deficient at the time I speak of; and among the rest, buyers of stolen goods were never found wanting to persons who had such articles to dispose of. The horse of the *marmiton* was at once judged, by the man to whom he offered it, to be that sort of merchandise which, being somewhat dangerous to the traffickers therein, may be bought and sold very much below its real value. It was somewhat knocked up also: the saddle and bridle, however, were in excellent condition, and the chapman, being rather honest than otherwise, absolutely gave the boy one fifth of what the whole was worth. With this sum, which was to him immense, our *marmiton* proceeded to the shop of a *fripier*, where, without difficulty, he obtained for himself a very smart suit, which had once belonged to one of the royal pages of honour, who had outgrown it, and transmitted it to his father's valet, who sent it to the abode where the *marmiton* found it. The boy had sold the horse at so great a loss, both because he did not dare drive a hard bargain about stolen goods, and because he was utterly ignorant of the value of the article he had to dispose of; but he was very nearly a match for the *fripier*, whose commodities were much more in his own line, and he obtained the clothes really not too dear. The worthy old clothesman added also a piece of advice which was somewhat useful to the *marmiton*.

"Be advised, my good boy," he said, "and before you put on that suit, wash your face and hands, or your dirty

face and your clean coat will make the people believe that you have stolen either the one or the other; and it cannot very well be your own countenance."

"Well," said the boy, "I'll wash myself if I can get water, for I am going to the king, and one must not go with dirty hands."

"Going to the king, you dirty shrimp!" exclaimed the *fripier*; "what mean you by going to the king? The king will have nothing to say to such a turnspit dog as you!"

"You are mistaken there, though, Master Threadbare," replied the *marmiton*; "the king will have a great deal to say to me, for I have got a great deal to say to him that he will give half a province to hear, if I judge right."

"A secret!" said the *fripier*, beginning to be more interested; "pray what is that, my boy?"

The boy laughed in his face, replying, "You must think me soft enough; but if you want to tell any secret to the king before me, tell him that he has more rogues in Paris than he knows of, and put yourself at the head of the list. Ha, ha, ha!"

He was quitting the shop with a shout of laughter; but the *fripier* was one of those who, having really a genius as well as a passion for intrigue of all kinds, was immediately interested in the boy, both on account of the nature of his enterprise, and the talent which he showed for that sort of undertaking.

"Stay, my lad, stay," he cried; "do not be too hasty. I will give you some advice, if you stop but for a moment, which shall cost you nothing if it does not succeed, and which, if you really have a secret worth anything, may make your fortune."

"Ay?" said the boy, pausing to listen; "tell me what that may be."

"Come hither," said the man, "and attend to what I have to say. You can never get speech to the king unless you have somebody to introduce you to him; now I will get you such an introduction if you will give me a couple of louis for *douceur*."

"How can you do that any more than myself?" asked the boy. "You are but a cleaner of used clothes, and I a cleaner of used plates. There's not much difference between us, for that matter; and I am not going to commit the sin of paying two louis for what God gives freely."

"And what is that?" cried the *fripier*. "What is that, my young riddler?"

"Why, empty air," replied the boy; "fine words, I mean, Master Threadbare; fat promises and thin performances. No, no, I will pay nothing for that."

"Heaven forbid that you should," answered the *fripier*. "Why, lad, you are as suspicious as a ratcatcher's dog; but I'll show in a minute how I can do all that I promise to do. Tell me, my lad—you seem to know something of the court—who is the king's *valet-de-chambre*? Can you say?"

"Ay, that I can well," replied the boy. "Many a cuff has Master Lebel given me in his day."

"Right, boy, right," replied the *fripier*, judging from the boy's instant answer that he was in reality acquainted with the court. "Well, then, look at this letter, if you can read, and see whose name is signed at the bottom."

The boy took the letter and read it through. "Ha, ha!" he said; "he is coming to you to-night, and wants a hundred louis: I understand you now. You would have me tell my secret to him: is that it?"

"No!" answered the *fripier*. "No, no, my boy, I see you are too shrewd for that: nor would I ever advise it. Master Lebel is one of those who will never let any one benefit by anything wherby he can benefit himself. No, but he may bring you to the presence of the king if you really have a secret worth telling."

"Ha, ha! this is something like, now," replied the boy. "Come, Master Fripier, you are likely to win your two louis; but we must about the business speedily, or some one may step in before us."

"You see," replied the *fripier*, "that he marks seven o'clock here as the hour when he is to be here; so, my boy, we can do nothing before that. Come to me at that hour, and I will introduce you to him, and then, if you do not manage matters, it is your fault, not mine."

"Right," replied the boy, "right. I won't miss my mark, depend upon it, but be here at seven exactly; so now fare you well, good friend."

"One more word before you go," replied the *fripier*, "which is a word of good counsel, too, my lad, and no offence in life to a young gentleman of honour who is seeking to make his way in the world."

"What is it?" said the boy. "What is it?"

"Only this," answered the *fripier*; "if you should by any chance have stolen the money as well as the secret, you had better keep yourself quite quiet and out of sight for the rest of the day. There is a good inn not far off, round that corner there, where people lie snug occasionally."

"Oh! I never steal anything," answered the boy; "but I am tired and going to sleep, so I shall be quiet enough. Good-by, good-by," and away he went.

At the hour of seven, in the gray light which at that time of day and season of the year pervaded the inner recesses of a Parisian shop—especially when it was situated in the far depths of the city, where house piled upon house, and lane jostling alley, cut off great part of the rays even of the meridian sun—there sat together the *fripier* and the *valet-de-chambre* of the king, who, though calling himself on all occasions a gentleman (Heaven defend us!), did not scruple, when occasion served, to frequent such places as these in which we now find him. He might be seen at many times, when the daylight was somewhat dim, entering many a low shop, prying into many a poor abode, and sometimes sojourning long therein, either upon his master's account or his own.

His views and occupations on many of these occasions we will not offend the reader by inquiring into; suffice it to notice the personal business which now led him to the dwelling of the *fripier*. With him, as with many others in his situation, though he derived large sums from the vices and follies of those upon whom he was dependant, the contact with their corruption induced habits of expense which often left him poor in the midst of opulence. When he saw a king, beggared in finances, unscrupulously pillage his subjects to supply materials for his own gratifications, no one can wonder that he was inclined to pillage his king for the same purposes. Thus Master Lebel often laid his hands upon perquisites, his rights to which were more than doubtful, and often sent to the abode of our good friend the *fripier* articles which might have long appeared upon the king's person or ornamented Versailles, had he not discovered some flaw which, in his opinion, rendered them unworthy of the royal touch. Sometimes, also, he was obliged to anticipate such resources; and, calculating that garments still new would wear with time, and must find

their way into his hands, he would sell the monarch's robes upon his back, and thus extract some gold from the close purse of the serviceable friend with whom he was now conversing.

The *fripier* had told him of his adventure with the boy, and Lebel had just laughed with a scornful sneer at such a person as the other described having anything worthy of the king's ear, when the *marmite* himself appeared, dressed in his new plumage, and looking, to say sooth, both smart and graceful, though still, of course, very diminutive in size, the new clothes having expanded his heart without enlarging his person.

"Good-even, Monsieur Lebel," he said. "Good-even to your worship. I dare to say this good gentleman has told you that I want speech of his majesty."

The *valet-de-chambre* stared at the boy with as scrutinizing a glance as the state of the light in the shop would admit, and remained a moment or two gazing upon him intently, as if for the very purpose of confusing and abashing him. But the *marmite* was one not so easily put out of countenance, and he was, moreover, impressed with a great idea of his own importance; an idea which, certainly, when it is sufficiently fixed and strong, carries us through innumerable difficulties and dangers, in which our boat would founder without the aid of that buoyant, cork-like quality called self-conceit.

"Well, Master Lebel," said the *marmite*, at length, "you seem in a contemplative mood this morning. Pray let me know when you have done, and give me an answer whither you will bring me to speech of the king; or shall I apply to another?"

"Bring you to speech of the king!" exclaimed Lebel. "You saucy Jack Snipe, I will bring you to acquaintance with a horsewhip. Why your face, though you have scrubbed it, is as clear upon my recollection covered with grease and smoke as if I had beheld it yesterday."

"Then where did you behold it?" demanded the boy, saucily. "If you have seen it, you can doubtless tell where."

"Do you think I recollect by the mark every brass pot I meet with?" rejoined Lebel. "But we will soon bring down your impudence, good youth. I pray thee, Monsieur Vingtun, send for an archer from the police bureau. Depend upon it, this boy has stolen money to

buy his fine clothes. We must have him to the Châtelet. Do not let him get away."

"Oh, no fear! no fear!" answered the boy, whose courage and impudence had risen rather than decreased by food, rest, and reflection. "No fear of my going, Master Lebel. Here I sit, send for whom you will. Only remember that I tell you I have something to say to the king which he would give half a province to hear; and as he must know the whole matter sooner or later, you can judge whether he will be well pleased to find that you have kept the tidings from him till, perhaps, it may be too late, and have also maltreated the messenger. Now send for all the archers in France if you will, I care not. They will bring me to the presence of the king, if you do not."

There was something so cool and satisfied in the boy's whole tone and manner, that it was evident he at least thought his secret of import; and there was also something so shrewd and clever in his looks and words, that Lebel inferred he was not likely to make a bad guess of what the king would like to hear. Now the *valet-de-chambre* would have given half a pound of the best snuff that he ever took from the royal canister—and that, for him, would have been a considerable sacrifice—to learn the boy's secret, for the purpose of knowing whether it was really worth retailing, and of making use of it for his own purposes; but the boy was evidently impenetrable; and, as the next best thing, Lebel continued to stare in his face, for the purpose of ascertaining where he had seen him before; a fact which had utterly escaped from his memory, though he was quite sure that the boy's face had met his eyes many a time.

At length a sudden light seemed to strike him. "Ha!" he exclaimed, "now I recollect! You are the little villain of a *marmiton* who put sugar into my basin of soup the other day at Michy."

"The same, Monsieur Lebel! the same!" replied the *marmiton*; "and the same whose ears you boxed for so doing."

"Now I begin to see the whole matter," said Lebel, thoughtfully. "So I know your business now."

"Ay!" said the boy, somewhat apprehensive that his secret might have escaped by some other channel; "how so, I pray you, Monsieur Lebel?"

"Why, simply this," replied the valet, "that the young

lady—I mean the last—that was brought to Michy has been carried off from that place.”

“Phoe!” cried the boy, “you know nothing about it!”

“I know as much as the king,” replied the *valet-de-chambre*; “and, moreover, there has been a sad to do about it this very morning at Versailles.”

“Well,” answered the boy, in a more important tone than ever, “it is in order to make the king know more than either he or you know that I want to see him. If you bring me to him, I will tell him how the whole happened, every step the girl took, where she went to, and where she now is.”

“If you tell that, your fortune is made,” cried Lebel. “Come with me! come with me! and you shall be Monsieur Marmiton for the rest of your life!”

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Lebel and the *marmiton* arrived at Versailles, it was found that the king was occupied, and no one dared to disturb him for the time. The audience, therefore, which the boy solicited was of necessity delayed till the following morning, and during the course of the whole evening he was subjected to an ordeal, after which he might have been considered as well qualified for admission into any diplomatic cabinet in Europe. The court of Savoy itself could not have produced any one shrewder, or more skilful at detecting and parrying every subtle contrivance of an enemy, than the *marmiton* proved himself to be in his conversation with Lebel. The latter left no means untried, either by a quiet jest, a sly question upon something apparently totally unconnected with the subject, a trap within trap, which he fancied it entirely impossible that the boy could discover, or, in short, any other art whatsoever which the wit of man could devise to worm out of the boy his secret, for the purpose of making use of it himself. To his surprise, however, he found that in this sort of mental fencing the boy took as much delight as he did himself, or even more; for when he, frustrated at every point, suffered the subject to drop for a moment, the lad, with

a degree of malicious fun, would cunningly lead the conversation back towards the same topic, and engage the disappointed valet in new efforts, which were frustrated as before. The next object of Lebel was to prevent the boy holding any communication with the other personages of the royal household; and he therefore kept him in his rooms all night, under strong apprehensions lest any one should get hold of him, and bring him without his participation to the royal ear.

As early the next morning as possible, the fact of the boy's presence at Versailles was notified to the king, and he was admitted to the royal chamber while Louis was dressing. He stood in one corner of the room while all the pompous foolery took place which, by that time, had become a rule of state at the rising of a French monarch. Every gentleman who had a claim to hand to the king any part of his wardrobe was there present, the one giving Louis his shirt, another his waistcoat, another his stockings, and the whole of the undignified process being gone through with an air of as solemn gravity as if it had been an execution. The various nobles gazed at the boy from time to time as he stood in the corner, wondering what brought him there, and sometimes, misled by his gay apparel into a belief that he was a person of consequence, experiencing sensations of jealousy and apprehension lest this new claimant should take from them a part of the royal favours.

As soon as Louis was up, and, by the different arts and appliances of the day, had been made to look somewhat more king-like and youthful than he did at first, he turned towards a small cabinet which lay to the right of his bedroom, and, making a sign to the boy, he said, "Come hither, come hither; Lebel, bring him hither. Give me a *robe de chambre*."

He addressed one of the gentlemen who stood nearest to him, and who immediately took up a dressing-gown which lay at hand and offered it to the monarch. At that very instant, however, another nobleman laid his hand upon the arm of the first, and insisted that it was his right to hand the dressing-gown. The first replied that the king had spoken to him. The one claimed by the king's immediate command, the other by his ancient right, and for several minutes the king was kept waiting, till at length he was obliged to decide the dispute himself, and of course gave his judgment in favour of

etiquette. The person whose privilege it was handed him the dressing-gown, but the king, somewhat cold and very impatient, forbade him to assist in putting it on, and conferred that honour upon the other. He then retired into the cabinet, followed by Lebel and the boy, and remained there for half an hour, with the door closed upon the whole party of attendant nobles.

The conversation which took place between the monarch, the *valet-de-chambre*, and the *marmiteau* on every account had better not be transcribed, for it is well known that in his communications with the pitiful minions who surrounded him, and the vile instruments of his pleasures, Louis forgot both what was due to his character as a gentleman and his character as a king. The result, however, was, that at the end of the half hour, while he remained in the cabinet and finished there the operations of his toilet, Lebel and the boy issued forth and went together to a room on the ground floor, where a single secretary was found busily writing by himself. The *valet-de-chambre* leaned down beside him, saying in a low, quiet tone, "Be pleased, Monsieur Hastelmont, to draw up an order for the liberation of Monsieur le Baron de Cejare, and carry it up for the king's signature; after which you will have the kindness to put this young gentleman upon the king's household-book as one of the pages of the ante-chamber, with a pension of eight hundred livres."

The secretary looked round to the boy, and, perfectly ignorant of his previous condition, said, in a quiet tone, "Will you have the goodness, sir, to tell me your Christian and surname?"

"My name is Julien Beaufils," replied the boy; and the secretary made a note thereof, with the directions which Lebel had given him.

"Now, sir," said Lebel, speaking to the boy in the same tone as the secretary had assumed, "if you will go to my room, I will join you in a minute or two, and we will have breakfast before you set out."

The boy went away without reply, and the moment his back was turned the secretary inquired of Lebel, with somewhat of a grin, "Who have you got there, *mon cher*?"

"The devil himself for cunning," replied Lebel; "I believe he has done more for himself with the king in half an hour than many another man would do in a

lifetime. I have never seen his equal in impudence, shrewdness, and hypocrisy."

"Not when you looked in the glass, Lebel!" replied the secretary, with a laugh. "You have done well for yourself, I fancy, too."

"Not I," answered Lebel: "but he is beyond any of us. Why, the day before yesterday he was a *mermition* at Michy. However, Monsieur Hastelmont, be so kind as to make out those orders, and draw also an order for fifty crowns for me."

"Nonsense, Lebel," replied the secretary; "you know very well I cannot do that without the king's commands."

"The king intends it, indeed," replied Lebel: "you may ask him if you doubt me;" and, thus saying, he went away in another direction. In a moment or two after he was speaking to the captain of the guard: one of the officers of the old régime, indeed, but one whose humble devotion towards his sovereign was elevated by none of those high and chivalrous feelings which were at one time characteristic of the French nobility. The officer in question laid his hand upon his heart, shrugged up his shoulders, declared himself ready to obey his monarch's orders to the death, and immediately gave some commands to one of his inferiors in grade.

After his brief conversation with the captain of the guard, Lebel returned somewhat slowly towards the royal cabinet, where he found Louis, freed from the importunate presence of his courtiers, and conversing with the secretary we have mentioned alone.

"How is this, Lebel, how is this?" exclaimed the king: "how came you to tell Monsieur Hastelmont to give you fifty crowns?"

"I thought, sire," replied Lebel, with a low bow and a grave air, "that your majesty intended it."

"Why," exclaimed the king, "I never said any such thing."

"No, sire," replied Lebel, with another low bow, "but I thought your majesty had forgot to say it. I was quite sure that the greatest and most generous monarch on earth would never give a boy a place and a pension because he had brought a piece of news which I would have discovered by other means in a few hours, and never give his poor servant Lebel a reward of fifty crowns for finding out the boy, and thus, in fact, gaining the information in the first place."

Louis had at first looked angry, but he laughed before the man concluded, saying, "Write the order, Hastelmont, write the order! such a piece of impudence is worth fifty crowns for once in a way. Only take care that it be not repeated, Lebel, or you may chance to find yourself in the Châtelet some day."

"Any place to which your majesty might please to send me," replied Lebel, with a profound inclination of the head and turn up of the eyes, "would be cheered and brightened by the knowledge that I am obeying your will."

We need not pursue any farther the conversation that took place between the king and his *valet-de-chambre*, which, to speak the truth, speedily assumed a somewhat profane character. Ere it had gone far, however, one of the ministers was announced, and Lebel left his sovereign and went to breakfast with the page. The latter, however, was speedily summoned to lead the way at the head of a small party of cavalry, whose orders were to search for and bring into the presence of the king Mademoiselle de St. Morin, upon the pretext of hearing her statement in regard to the illegal proceedings, as the order termed them, by which she had lately suffered. This excuse, which had been suggested by Lebel, was very specious, and one easily managed, for the king well knew that he could stop such inquiry at whatsoever moment he thought fit, and that his was one of those cases where, to use the expression of the law, *he could take advantage of his own wrong*.

For a time, however, he was destined to be disappointed. The soldiery proceeded on their course, and the boy, who had taken care to mark every stick and stone between the chateau of Argencerre and Paris, led them, without a fault, to the very gates of that mansion. All was quiet within, however, and the windows in the front of the house were closed. The courtyards were empty, and the officer, beginning to suspect that the boy had deceived them, threatened him highly with his own indignation and the king's, as a preparative to something worse. The courtyard and the stables were found quite empty; and again and again the officer rang alternately the great bell which hung at the front of the chateau, and the little bell which hung at the back.

At length, as he was dropping the latter instrument of noise from his hand, in despair of making anybody hear,

he saw through one of the large grated windows which flanked each side of the back entrance, and had no shutters, something very like a human form crossing the hall within, and he accordingly addressed himself again to the bell with redoubled vehemence. The sound produced no effect, however, and he then seized upon the handle of the door, resolved to pull or knock it down, and to accomplish an entrance by some means. The door, however, yielded to his hand at once, and he now found that if he had applied for admittance in that manner at first, it would certainly not have been refused to him, the lock being merely upon the latch.

The moment he entered, he looked furiously round for the daring person who had neglected to attend to his repeated applications, and he beheld an old woman in a brown stuff gown, tucked through her pocket-hole so as to show a green calimanco petticoat underneath. She was in the very act of looking into a closet in the wall, and throwing out upon the floor of the passage sundry little articles of household gear, such as brushes and dusters; and the coolness and deliberation with which she proceeded enraged the officer to such a degree that he felt a strong inclination to run her through the body with his sword. He contented himself, however, with seizing her by the arm and shaking her violently, asking her how she dared to behave in such a manner to an officer of the royal guard.

"Yes, sir, yes," replied the old woman, looking calmly in his face. "Yes, sir, very! I am glad your honour thinks so! Everybody says the same."

"Says what? you old fool," exclaimed the officer; "says that you are mad or stupid?"

"Ay, terrible, indeed, sir," replied the ancient dame; "you are very good to say so. I have been so ever since I had the smallpox in the year 1701. I was just eleven years old then, and I have not heard a word since, that is to say, distinctly. This is my best ear, and if you speak low I can hear on that side sometimes; but this is one of my bad days, when I have such noises in my head as if all the bells in the village were ringing."

The officer thought that she might well have thought all the bells in the village were ringing; but seeing that it was perfectly in vain to attempt to make the old woman hear, he proceeded without farther question to search the house, much to the astonishment, it seemed,

of the good dame, who remonstrated manfully, but to no effect.

Not a room in the chateau was left unexamined; but, nevertheless, nothing was discovered which could lead any one to suppose for a moment that the place had been inhabited for many months, if not years. There was a look of dry and dusty solitude about it which was very convincing, and the officer suspected strongly that the boy had misled him and deceived the king. In this opinion he was confirmed on going forth again from the house. He then encountered a little knot of villagers, who had been gathered together by curiosity on the unusual appearance of soldiery, and asked them where was the family belonging to the chateau.

"Why, bless you, monseigneur," replied one of the peasants, "the chateau has not been inhabited for these many years: not since my old lord died."

"Now, you young scoundrel," cried the officer, turning to the *marmite*, "what do you say to this? Have you or have you not been deceiving us?"

"Deceiving you!" said the boy, with a laugh; "I should get very little by that! But I will show you something in a minute which will prove whether I have been deceiving you or not. Look at the marks of the wheels going into the gateway! Look where they have cut the grass in the courtyard. Now ask Jean Bonhomme there whether he has been cheating you or not, and whether there were not people in the chateau all yesterday."

"No," answered the peasant, who had spoken before, and who had heard what the boy said, "there was nobody in the chateau yesterday but old Jeannotte, for I took her up some bundles of sticks myself at twelve o'clock in the day. The boy's a liar."

"So think I," rejoined the officer; and poor Julien Beauvais was very likely to go home with a bad reputation, and lose more by a mistake than he had gained by his wit, when one of the women interposed, saying,

"Ay, but you dwell a good way off, Paul; and I, who live by the road, heard a desperate galloping the night before last, and carriage wheels and all, as if the king were going by."

"And I," said a little boy, "saw the back court filled with men and horses!" Another of the party was soon found, who declared that she had seen a large train set

out from the chateau about ten o'clock on the preceding day, when all the inhabitants of the hamlet were at a distance in the fields doing their autumnal work, she herself having come home to prepare her father's dinner.

Nothing more, however, could be learned. No one could tell which direction the party who had made this brief visit to the chateau had taken on quitting it; and, after some farther inquiries, the officer, beginning to find that the hour of dinner was passed, left one of his men to pursue the investigation, and turned his steps back towards Versailles. The march was considered too far to be accomplished that day, and it was, consequently, wellnigh ten o'clock on the following morning before the *marmiton* and his companions reached the royal presence.

The boy immediately found his way to the apartments of the king's valet, and entered the room without ceremony. He found Monsieur Lebel occupied, however, with two personages, who were evidently worthy of some remark. The one was a gentleman of good mien, graceful exterior, handsome dress and person, but, withal, possessing in the highest degree that indescribable air of supercilious licentiousness which particularly characterized the courtiers of Louis XV. He looked, in short, as if he scorned everything—even to himself! and he certainly did scorn all things connected with honourable and virtuous feeling. He was sitting in a chair, tapping his shoe with his cane, and saying to Lebel, who stood beside him, "I really do not see, Lebel, what difference grades make in any act. There are only two entities in the world, pleasure and pain; and one thing that gives us pleasure is just as good as another; everything that gives us pain, had alike."

So spoke the Count Jean de Barry, one of the least virtuous of the licentious court of Louis, where almost all were vicious. We shall not pause upon Lebel's reply to this exposition of the count's views, but turn rather to the other person whom the room contained, whom we shall probably never have to mention again.

She was a young woman, dressed with great elegance and taste, though not with richness; but the extraordinary personal attractions which she certainly did possess were displayed in not a very decent manner. Hers was beauty, however, of a style which is the least of all others beautiful; for, though all the forms were fine and

the colouring magnificent, though there was grace as well as symmetry, yet the expression—not only of the face, but of the whole figure; not of one individual feature or another, but of every feature and every limb—was of a kind painfully voluptuous. She might have afforded an excellent representative of the earthly Aphrodite, but never could have been mistaken for the heavenly one. Such was the person who at that time bore the name of Mademoiselle Lange, but who afterward ruled France by her power over the weaknesses of a libertine king, under the name of Madame du Barry.

As soon as Lebel saw the boy, he exclaimed aloud, "Have you found her?"

"No," answered the boy; "as I told you we should be, we were too late, and we have not found her."

"Never mind," replied Lebel, "I think we can do without her."

CHAPTER VII.

"ALTHOUGH they be a pack of rash and low-minded villains," said the king, speaking to Lebel, "we must not suffer them, on that account, to be punished for doing our will. You are sure that none of them compromised our name in the matter?"

"Quite sure," answered Lebel; "I have Monsieur Morin's word for it, sire; though he says, and so say the rest of the police, that there was not one of them who would have failed to plead your majesty's orders if they had not been stopped, and that the Baron de Cajare actually did so."

So far Lebel thought himself obliged to report Pierre Morin's speech truly; for he had a certain dread of the commissary of police, of his keenness and his power, which made him afraid of saying anything actually untrue of him; or of concealing anything from the king which Morin directed him to communicate. That dread, however, like every other kind of fear, was not a little mingled with dislike; and he lost no opportunity of saying, every now and then, a word or two which he thought might injure that good officer in the opinion of the king.

Louis, however, notwithstanding all his vices and his many weaknesses, had good sense enough to know those who served him well and zealously; nor would any slight cause induce him to withdraw his favour from persons who showed honesty and wisdom in his service. He was pleased with every appearance of devotion to himself, whether it took the form of depraved subservency to his will, or any courtly shape of respect; but he would often bear opposition, and even rudeness, with the utmost patience, if it were proved to proceed from disinterested motives, and from a real zeal for his good or that of the country.

This peculiarity of his character was strongly shown in the present instance; for, as soon as the *valel-de-chambre* had done justice to the words of Pierre Morin, he went on, in the true spirit of his class, to do the commissary as much disservice as it was possible.

"Indeed, sire," he continued, "I cannot help thinking that Monsieur Morin must have a great animosity towards Monsieur de Cajare, from the way he spoke of him."

"Indeed," said the king; "do you know any cause he has for disliking Monsieur de Cajare?"

"Not exactly," replied Lebel; "but, of course, it is very easy, your majesty, to see when a man hates another, by the way he speaks of him. He said that Monsieur de Cajare was a dangerous person to trust; for that, whatever he did, he always had his own interest in view; and, in short, he seemed to think very ill of him indeed, and not to conceal it."

"That may be very well, Lebel," replied the king, "without his acting with any degree of malice or animosity. I may think you a vast scoundrel, Lebel, and not hate you either."

"Your majesty's too good," said Lebel, bowing down to the very ground, as if the king had paid him a high compliment; "but yet, sire, it was surely very saucy of this Monsieur Morin to go to Michy at all. What business had he there?"

"You do not understand what you are talking about, Lebel," replied the king: "these men chose to play the fool, and to pass themselves off for the police when they had no occasion to do so, and which, moreover, is quite against the law and my pleasure. Morin asked Monsieur de Choiseul if they had authority, and finding they had

none, he of course proceeded to arrest them. He went a little beyond what was right, perhaps, in regard to Monsieur de Cajare, but still that person was very imprudent; and we have proof positive that he was inclined to betray the trust reposed in him."

"Well, your majesty," replied Lebel, "I have nothing to say against Monsieur Morin, of course; but I cannot help thinking that he did not act with due respect."

"Hush, hush!" replied the king; "say no more upon the subject: I have not a more faithful servant in this realm than that same Pierre Morin; and, since he has been at the head of that office, an immense improvement has taken place in the police. Let the men be set free from the Châtelet, and see that the order I gave for Monsieur de Cajare not to present himself at Versailles till farther orders be properly notified to him. I would have all who have been employed in this business be warned to be careful, if they would not find their way into the prison again."

The orders of the king were duly obeyed. Notice was given to Pierre Morin to set free all the persons who had been taken at the chateau of Michy; and, summoning them one by one to his presence at his own bureau, he gave them a careful admonition as to a discreet use of any secrets that they possessed, and in regard to their future conduct in their various avocations. Pierre Jean was the last whom he thought fit to speak with; but not even the Châtelet had been able to diminish, by a shade, the brazen impudence of Pierre Jean.

"My dear friend and counsellor," he replied to the warnings of Pierre Morin, "it is all no use; I could not be an honest man if I would: nature is against me; I was born to roguery as my inheritance; and I do declare that I have often tried very hard to behave like an honest man without being able. Why, in this very business that I was put in here for, I vow that twenty times, when I looked at the girl, and she said a kind word to me, I was tempted to give her a hint of the whole matter; but then Satan himself, or some of his imps, always whispered in my ear, in the most insinuating tone possible, 'Two hundred louis, and all expenses paid.' It was not possible to resist that, you know."

"Hardly, indeed," replied Pierre Morin, "especially as, I suppose, my good friend, you expected protection even if you were caught."

"No, no, no!" replied Pierre Jean: "do not do justice to my prudence at the expense of my wit; I never expected protection at all. If it had been a shopkeeper or a poor man that had employed me, I might have expected something of the kind; but the higher the person the less the security. No, no, no! Solomon, or some of those great people wrote, put not your faith in princes; and he who said so knew more of his own race than most people do of their kidney."

"Well, Master Pierre Jean," replied Morin, "all I have to tell you is this, if I catch you at any such tricks again, especially with regard to this same lady, I shall deal with you in a different way from what I have done at present; for, instead of arresting you for a minor offence, I shall have you apprehended for that business on the other side of the Seine, where robbery and an attempt to murder were in question; then we should see you swinging in the Grève to a certainty, you know."

"No, no, you would not do that," replied Pierre Jean; "I know you better, Monsieur Morin."

"And why not?" replied Pierre Morin. "You are deceiving yourself altogether. I will do it, as I live."

"No, no," answered the man; "but I will tell you why not. First, because you know that I never wanted to murder the man, or tried to murder him; and, next, because you would never have a hand in hanging one of the oldest friends and acquaintances you have in the world."

"Friends and acquaintances!" said Pierre Morin, gazing on the man steadfastly; "what do you mean, sir? take care what you say."

"Ay, ay," replied Pierre Jean; "twenty years does make a difference, and fortune changes favours; but I knew you well enough when I was a shopboy to old Fiteau the goldsmith. Ay, and I could tell you more about that business if I liked: something that might astonish you to hear."

Whatever might have been the feelings of Pierre Morin—whether he had or had not previously recognised Fiteau's *ci-devant* shopboy—cannot be told, but he had by this time learned to conceal all emotions, and not the slightest trace of any such thing as surprise could be detected on his countenance.

"I wonder, Master Pierre Jean," he said, "that you, who have been so long trading among the sharp people

of Paris, do not know that there is nothing at all takes place which we are not aware of here. For yourself, I will give you your own history in two minutes if you like to hear it. Here," he cried aloud to one of the clerks within, "give me folio five hundred, letter P. J."

As soon as the huge volume was brought to him, he turned to the words Pierre Jean, and that worthy beheld two or three long columns filled with his own good acts and deeds.

"Ay," continued Pierre Morin, as he read over the first part, "I see what you tell me is true, though I never looked to that part of your story before. You were shopboy to Fiteau at the time he was murdered, and were strongly suspected, I find, of having purloined some of the articles you were sent out to deliver."

"Upon my honour," cried Pierre Jean, "I never stole a thing for three years after that."

"That is to your credit," replied Pierre Morin; "you caught the vice in the army, I suppose; for here I find you were drummed out of the tenth regiment, and then again you were confined for three months for swindling, and then were charged with robbing the royal courier, for which Corvant was hanged, and then—"

"Ah, Monsieur Morin, Monsieur Morin," cried Pierre Jean, "stop, in pity's name! I see there is no biography like that of the police-office."

Pierre Morin smiled, and, pointing to the end of the voluminous article headed "Pierre Jean," he showed him a long line of small crosses made in red ink, and asked, "Do you understand what that means, my good friend?"

"No, sir," replied Pierre Jean, who by this time was very much inclined to call him monseigneur; "pray what may be the interpretation thereof?"

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven," said Pierre Morin, counting the crosses, "that means hangable upon seven counts! But come, come, Master Pierre Jean, don't be downhearted; there are one or two others that have got more crosses than you have. Why, the fellow I had executed on Wednesday week had ten, and you may escape yet if you choose to make yourself serviceable, keep yourself quiet, and, above all things, hold your tongue when you are not told to speak."

"Oh!" cried Pierre Jean, "I will be as silent as the grave: my tongue shall never carry me to the gallows, if I can help it."

"No," replied Pierre Morin, "but you must always tell me what I want to know."

"Oh, I am ever at your honour's feet," replied Pierre Jean.

"Well, then," continued Monsieur Morin, "be so good as to tell me now what it was you said would surprise me."

"I don't think now," replied Pierre Jean, "that anything would surprise you; but what I meant was, that on that night when Fiteau was murdered, I saw three men instead of two coming down the street. Two of them were those who were broke on the wheel; but there was a third, who is still living, for I saw him not many days ago."

Still Pierre Morin showed no sign of astonishment. "Did you speak to him?" he demanded.

"Oh! not I," answered Pierre Jean: "he is a great man nowadays, and was going into the court when I saw him."

"You were wise," replied the commissary, "and will be still wiser if you hold your tongue about the matter to every one."

"Oh, that I will," answered Pierre Jean; "I never thought of mentioning it—one hawk does not kill another, you know—but I did think that I might make use of the secret some time, for I was just then going down to Castelneau; and I fancied, if I were caught, and they tried to punish me, I would stop them by threatening to tell what I knew."

"You would only have got yourself hanged," replied Pierre Morin, "and done him no harm."

"Ay, how so?" demanded Pierre Jean, with some surprise.

"Because," replied Pierre Morin, "when a scoundrel accuses a gentleman, he must either prove his accusation or prove his honesty; now I take it, Master Pierre Jean, that you could neither do the one nor the other. There was no word but your own for the matter, and you know well what your word is worth in any court throughout France. Be a wise man, Monsieur Pierre Jean, and do not meddle with hot pitch without a long spoon."

"I never thought of doing anything but frightening him," replied Pierre Jean; "and as to the long spoon, I do not know where that is to come from."

"Nor I either," replied Pierre Morin, "unless I give you one; but go along just now. You are free, you know, for the time being; you may be safe enough if you like; but, if you interfere with things that don't concern you, you will have a hempen cravat before the week is out."

"I will take care, I will take care," replied Pierre Jean, who, to say the truth, had been a good deal more frightened by the conversation of the commissary than ever he had been in his life before, and with a very low reverence he quitted the room, and was suffered to issue forth at liberty.

The next person who appeared before the commissary was introduced with some sort of secrecy, having been led, from a back door which opened into a distant street, through various long and tortuous passages to the office of Pierre Morin. He was a dark, coffee-coloured man, with hair frizzed and powdered, sharp, keen, gray eyes, a skin somewhat marked with the smallpox, a waistcoat of very gay embroidery, and a snuff-coloured coat with plain buttons. He bowed reverently before Pierre Morin, while the latter, as had become somewhat customary with him, looked at his visiter from head to foot for a moment or two without uttering a syllable. At length the commissary opened his lips, saying, "You are the valet of Monsieur de Cajare?"

The man laid his hand upon his heart and bowed to the ground, shrugging up his shoulders till they almost contrived to swallow up his head between them. "You have received the message I sent you?" continued Pierre Morin: the man bowed again; "and are willing to agree to the terms?" added the officer of police, liking him all the better for his taciturnity.

The man, in reply, gave the same kind of affirmation; and, looking upon that bow as a part of the sentence, he connected it with what was to follow by a conjunction, saying, "But I fear I cannot do so much as you expect."

"Why not?" rejoined Pierre Morin. "You would say that the baron is not communicative; that he does not talk to you as some gentlemen do to their valets; that he keeps his secrets to himself. I know all that already, my good friend. But what you have to do is this: to report regularly twice or three times a day everything that you hear from your fellow-servants, where the bar-

on breakfasts, dines, and sleeps, who are his companions, what he loses or wins at play, and, in short, every particular that you have to tell, with all that you suspect ; and leave us to do the rest. But you must never confound suspicions with facts."

"I will do all that you tell me, sir," replied the man, "and nothing you tell me not."

"Is the baron yet free?" demanded Pierre Morin.

"He is free, has dressed himself, and, when I came away, was talking with his sister," said the valet.

"Where does he go to-night?" demanded Pierre Morin.

"He goes to play at piquet," the servant answered, "with the Count de Royan and the Abbé de Verdun."

"He will lose money to them," rejoined Pierre Morin.

"I don't know, sir," replied the valet ; "he is improved lately."

"But he is not equal to them," said Pierre Morin : "let me know what he loses, if you can find out."

The man promised to obey him ; and all this matter being settled, the valet was suffered to depart, and Pierre Morin turned to other business.

CHAPTER VIII.

It is now high time to turn to Annette de St. Morin ; but still we need not pause upon all that took place at the chateau to which she had been conveyed, before she again left it from an apprehension which, as we have seen, was very just, that the course of her journey had been watched, and that means would be taken to pursue and bring her back to Michy.

It was in a small plain *chaise de poste*, then, with none but one servant on the outside thereof, and containing within no one but Annette herself and the lady whom she only knew by the name of Louise, that Mademoiselle de St. Morin was pursuing her journey through some woods which lie in the neighbourhood of Chartres. Donnine, Annette's maid, and another woman servant, with two of the men, had been sent upon another road nearly parallel, and were ordered to direct their course

every day towards the same point as the *chaise de poste*. Two servants on horseback followed the carriage at the distance of about three miles, and another mounted attendant preceded it by nearly an hour's journey. Thus many precautions were taken; but these were not all; for the lady, in speaking with Annette during their first day's expedition, endeavoured to remove all anxiety from her mind by saying, "Fear not, my sweet child, fear not; we have a good friend actively employed in our service, who has greater means than any other man in France of baffling our pursuers, and misleading them as to our course."

The journey of the first and second day passed over quietly, and Annette's fears began to subside, and her heart to beat less timidly at every sound she heard and every new face that she beheld upon the road. Her companion was all tenderness and kindness; but, even had she been less so, there was something in her very countenance, in the tone of her voice, in the expression of her eyes, which would have made Annette's bosom warm towards her, and taught her to trust and to confide. But in the long and thoughtful conversations which took place now as they sat side by side, in the occasional outbursts of feeling which poured forth from the lady's heart, in the deep and solemn comments which from time to time found their way to her lips upon the manifold subjects that they discussed—comments breathing of deep, long, earnest thought upon all the great and important points of human life, and man's strange destiny—in all these things Annette found fresh cause every hour to admire and love the fair being with whom she was brought into such close communion. There was an interest, too, in the very mystery of their mutual connexion; a warm and thrilling interest, which made Annette feel differently towards her than to any other human being. The very questions that she asked her own heart concerning that connexion awoke all the tenderness and sweetest sympathies of our nature in favour of the stranger.

"What," Annette would ask herself, "what could be the meaning of that long, earnest, tender gaze with which the lady regarded her from time to time? What the secret emotions which caused the tears suddenly to rise into her eyes? What the warm and overpowering feelings which every now and then would make the

lady cast her arm around her, and press a kiss upon her cheek and brow?"

Sometimes she would think that some of the nearest and dearest ties must exist between them, and her own heart beat at the idea with sensations ~~nigh~~ to ecstasy. But the sweetest of all the dreams—a dream which was nourished by the lady frequently calling her "my child"—was soon dispelled. Not only was there no ring upon the finger—for that in France and in those times might very well take place even in the case of a married woman—but the servants from time to time called her *mademoiselle*, a token which was not to be mistaken. What, then, could be the tie between them? for tie there evidently was. What could be the motive of all that lady's conduct? What the deep, heartfelt interest which was the secret of the whole.

Such inquiries set Annette's fancy roving through tracts which she had never ventured upon before. Up to that period she had asked herself but few, if any, questions concerning her previous history; she had rarely demanded, even of herself, who were her parents; she had never thought of why and how she had been left an orphan in the world, without any kindred tie that she perceived around her. This indifference, indeed, proceeded from no degree of apathy; but none of the circumstances in which she was placed had tended to awaken such thoughts. The love of the Abbé, Count de Castelleau seemed fully to supply that of a parent; and in the secluded life which she had led, no events had hitherto occurred to conduct imagination on the path of inquiry. Had the child which the abbé had adopted been a boy, the case, of course, would have been very different. At each step, then, in life, some circumstance would have occurred to excite investigation. The prattle and inquiries of schoolfellows, the companions of the camp or the field, the continual sight of all the ties of the world, the affections seen in other families, and kindnesses required and received by the individual, would all have made him ask long, long before, "Who, who, and what am I? Where are all the dear relationships, the sweet bonds which surround our childhood and our youth? Where are the kindred faces and the kindred names? Where the father's hand to guide and to protect? Where the mother's care to watch, to comfort, and to sooth? Where are the brothers, the sisters, the relations, the

family friends, the sweet ancestral home, and all the bright associations of the past linked with the present?" Such questions would have suggested themselves at every turn to the mind of the boy or the man; but woman's nature is to concentrate her affections within a smaller circle; to pour them more intensely on fewer objects; to give all lesser ties a lesser hold, and to be satisfied with limits that will not satisfy man.

Thus had Annette's life proceeded, contented with that which was, without looking into that which might be. A father's kindness could not exceed that of the Count de Castelneau, and she was satisfied with that love, without feeling a craving for more. She saw no happy homes around her, or but few, and those among the lower classes; and she was too little conversant with the joys of kindred to think thereof except when her attention was forced towards them. Once awakened, however, the whole tender and deep emotions of her heart—a heart well calculated to entertain every affection in its most ardent and lasting form—prompted her to inquire, "Where was the family from which she had a right to expect such feelings as those which the lady evinced towards her?" and often as they went she would fall into deep reveries, from which she was only roused by some new caress, which seemed to speak that the subject of her thoughts was comprehended.

Still, however, the lady not only gave no explanation herself, but when Annette approached the topic of the kindness which she had shown her, and the interest she took in her, her reply was turned in such a way as to intimate that all farther inquiry at that time would be painful to her. On other points, however, she spoke much more frankly, telling her fair companion in what direction her apprehensions had pointed, and explaining to her—as far as such a thing could be explained to the ears of purity and innocence—the character of the king, and the infamous acts which were from time to time perpetrated in France for the gratification of his licentiousness. The fears of Annette, indeed, had not before assumed any distinct and tangible form; and even now, though they took a definite direction, she shrunk from hearing more, and speedily, on her part, changed the conversation to subjects which certainly affected her actual situation less, but which were also less painful to her ear.

In this manner, as I have said, passed two days, and
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the evening of the second was coming rapidly on, when the carriage, making its way through the wood not many leagues from Chartres, was suddenly stopped and nearly overturned by the fore axle breaking and one of the wheels coming off. The country around, though beautiful, presented not the slightest appearance of a human habitation, and the embarrassment of the whole party was now extreme. No chance existed, the driver said, of finding any one capable of repairing the damage within the precincts of the forest, and it extended for at least two leagues farther.

After all the manifold consultations which generally follow such accidents, it was at length determined that the two ladies should set out with the coachman, as he knew the road better than the other servant, who was to remain in charge of the vehicle, and that they should proceed on the road to Chartres until they met with some habitation where they could either find shelter for an hour or two till the carriage could be repaired, or lodging for the night.

The road was sandy and difficult; and although the soft, calm, yellow light of the autumnal evening rested beautifully upon the mossy banks and silvery roots of the old beech-trees, though many a picturesque and enticing spot presented itself for repose, yet Annette and the lady hastened on, for both had by this time known enough of danger and sorrow to feel apprehension even when no actual peril appeared. Not more than an hour of daylight could be reckoned upon; and Annette strove to make herself believe that on a road so near a large city, and in a royal forest, one might wander safely long after the great luminary himself had sunk to repose; yet still she gazed eagerly forward at every turn of the road, in hopes of seeing some house or cottage where shelter could be obtained before the last look of the sun was withdrawn from the earth.

Both the lady and Annette were somewhat fatigued from the wearing effect of agitation and from several days of hurried travelling, which at that time was by no means so easy a process in France as at present, and the act of walking through the loose sand or over the rough gravel of a forest road soon tired them still more, so that it was with feelings of great delight on every account that at length the young lady exclaimed, "There is a house!"

As they approached nearer, they saw that it was not only a human habitation, but one of some size ; and by the tall pole and garland before the door, it appeared to be a house of public entertainment. All was calm and silent, too, about the place, which pleased Annette the more, as it was not to be expected that the company, if there had been any, in a *cabaret* in the forest would be very choice or agreeable ; and the profound stillness of the whole scene, the sweet, low sunshine pouring over the open sandy space before the house, and shining in at a door where sat a drowsy cat enjoying the last rays, afforded a promise of tranquillity which was very soothing.

Advancing together, then, with their apprehensions of a long walk through the wood by night now dispelled, the two ladies entered the door of the little inn. They found the interior less inviting than the outside, indeed, for the first room that presented itself was the ancient well-smoked kitchen, at the farther side of which, with her back towards them, was an old woman busily engaged in cooking. She was not very cleanly in her apparel, and by her side was a girl of about ten years old, still less neat. The face of the latter was turned towards the visitors as they entered, and presented a sadly unwashed aspect, while a fearful squint in the left eye gave a disagreeable expression to features which might otherwise have been pretty.

"Oh, dame !" exclaimed the girl, as she saw the two strangers, "here are ladies, and one has got—"

But the old woman stopped the girl from announcing what part of the ladies' apparel excited her admiration, by turning round and giving her a push which drove her against the side of the chimney ; and then, advancing towards Annette and her fair companion, she asked in a civil tone what she could do to serve them.

Their situation was speedily explained, and the good woman then informed them that about four miles farther on there was another house, where there was a blacksmith's shop. Somebody would be found there, she said, who could immediately repair the carriage ; but, at the same time that she offered the assistance of her little girl to show the coachman the way to the next *carrefour*, from which place the road was direct, she expressed a hope that the ladies would stay at her poor house all night, as it would take a long time to mend a

broken axle, and the distance to Chartres was nearly twelve miles. The countenance of the old woman was not very much more prepossessing than that of her daughter or granddaughter, whichever she was, and Annette felt a strange reluctance to remain in the place of shelter which they had now found. She argued down her prejudices, however, and said nothing in opposition to the proposal, though her companion turned to her with an inquiring look.

"We have better and cleaner rooms up stairs, madam," said the woman, seeming to divine at once part of the objections which might suggest themselves to the minds of her guests against remaining, "and everything is quite clean and nice there. I will get you a good supper ready in a minute, too, and I'll warrant you will be very comfortable."

The lady, without farther question, agreed to stay, and the coachman was immediately sent off with the little girl. Before the latter took her departure, however, the old woman gave her various directions, some of which were in a low and indistinct tone, while others, Annette could not but think, were spoken with affected loudness. Notwithstanding all that she could do to combat apprehension, she did not feel at all easy on seeing the man depart.

She remained below, thinking over her situation and looking out upon the placid forest scene sleeping in the evening sunshine, while her fair companion, Louisa, went up with the old woman to look at the rooms, the superior neatness of which she had boasted. As Annette paused and gazed forth, a tall deer bounded across, and took its way down the road which she and her companion had been themselves pursuing; and she was still watching his graceful form as he rushed onward, when suddenly, to her surprise, the noble animal fell forward and rolled upon his side, struggled up again as if with a last terrible effort, took a staggering step or two along the path, and then again came down, with his slender feet beating the ground in the agonies of death. No sound accompanied the fall of the deer; no report of firearms followed; but an instant after three or four men rushed forth from the neighbouring thicket, and sprang upon the prostrate body of the animal, one holding him by the horns and another by the feet. Annette

instantly drew back, and, by the impulse of the moment, closed the door of the house.

She had reached the foot of the stairs which led directly out of the kitchen into the rooms above, when she heard the steps of her friend and the old woman beginning to descend. At that moment, however, the sound of voices and feet were heard without; and, nearly at the same instant, the other lady re-entered the room, and the men whom Annette had seen without threw open the door, one of them exclaiming, before he discovered who it was that now tenanted the inn kitchen, "What the devil did you shut the door for, you old fool!"

The man who spoke was in the act of dragging in the deer, aided by three others, and at the moment, as he was pulling the animal violently on by the horns, his back was turned towards the spot where Annette stood. The faces of those who followed, however, were in such a direction that they instantly saw the two strangers with the old woman, and the look of consternation which this produced instantly caught the attention of their companion, who seemed also to be their leader. Dropping the head of the beast which they had just slaughtered upon the floor, he turned fiercely round, and gazed at Annette and the lady for a moment or two in silence, and then poured forth a torrent of invective against the old woman for admitting anybody to pry into what they were about.

"Lord bless you, my boy," cried the old woman, in a coaxing tone, "the ladies will never mind your taking a little bit of venison, nor tell about it either, I am sure."

But the man only seemed the more irritated in consequence of her endeavours to sooth him, and abused her with language such as had never before met Annette's ear.

"Oh! don't, don't," she cried, in horror at what she heard: "we will never say a word about it. We will pledge our word never to tell anything; but pray do not speak to her so."

The old woman's spirit, however, was by this time aroused, and a bad and a violent spirit it was; for she now returned the abuse of her son with far more acrimony and vehemence than he himself could command; and, as is very often the case in such encounters, overwhelmed and crushed, as it were, his rage by the fierce-

ness and volubility of her tongue. As soon, however, as this was accomplished, and she saw that the day was her own, she went close up to him, and, taking him by the arm, spoke a word or two in a low tone, which instantly seemed to attract all his attention. He listened to her eagerly, gazing at Annette and the lady with a sharp and inquiring look, and a knitted, heavy brow; and his eyes fixed particularly upon the large gold watches, with innumerable seals, and pendants, and little jewels, which both the ladies wore, as was then customary with every person of rank and station in France.

"Ah! that is different, that is different," he said. "Come, let us pull the buck in;" and this was accordingly done, so that the door could be closed. As soon as it was shut, the man who had hitherto spoken exclaimed, addressing one of his comrades, "Lock it, lock it;" and the key was instantly turned.

Annette gazed with a look of consternation upon her companion, and the lady at the same moment asked, "Why do you lock the door?"

"To prevent any one coming in that we don't like," replied the old woman, somewhat sharply; while her son added, in a jeering tone, "And to prevent any one from going out whom we would rather have stay here."

"Come, what are you going to be about?" said one of the other men, addressing the last speaker. "The lady does not seem inclined to do us any harm."

"No," said the other; "but those watches are mighty pretty things. I should think well worth fifty louis a piece; and it's more than likely there may be purses worth three or four times that sum; so I don't see, as we must risk our necks for this venison business, why—"

"But how will you keep them from telling, then?" said the other man.

"I don't know," answered the one who had spoken first. "We can think of that afterward. They must stay here all night."

Annette's heart had sunk from the first words which had been spoken, and the lady who was with her shook very much, and was deadly pale. But Annette's courage rose with the danger, and she took a step forward towards the men, saying, "The watches are worth more than fifty louis each; I have at least as much in my purse as you suppose; and we will give you the whole freely,

and without your asking for it, if you will let us go on at once to Chartres, or, rather, as a reward for showing us our way thither. If we give you the money freely, there is no robbery in the matter, and therefore there will be nothing to tell ; and, besides, we will promise—nay, we will swear—never to say one word of what has happened to any one.”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” cried the old woman’s son ; “they would call it robbery all the same ; and as for oaths, what are oaths good for ! People swear so help them God ! Who cares for God nowadays ! We have too much philosophy in France for that stuff now.”

The sky had been getting darker for some time, and at that moment there was a long, low peal of thunder ; but the ribald went on with a scoff, exclaiming, “There, do you hear that ! There was a time when the old fools would expect God to strike one dead ; but I shall go on my own way, for all that grumbling.”

“For Heaven’s sake do not,” said Annette. “We have never injured you in any way. We are willing to—”

“Who is that at the door ?” exclaimed the man. “Some one shook the door.”

“Oh ! it is only Tim, and Henri, and the other fellow,” said the old woman : “I told the girl to fetch them quick.”

“Stop, stop ; do not open the door,” exclaimed her son. “Let us be sure first.”

But at that moment Annette turned her eyes to the window, and a loud cry of joy burst from her lips. The looks of all were turned in that direction also ; but, before any one could advance, the casement was dashed violently in, a man sprang into the room, and Ernest de Nogent stood by Annette’s side. A servant followed with his drawn sword in his hand, and Ernest brought round the hilt of his own weapon, demanding, “Dear Annette, what is the meaning of all this ! Who are these men ! Why are you so pale ?

“Give me the crossbow,” said the old woman’s son, stretching out his hand to one of the men behind him, but keeping his eyes still fixed on Ernest de Nogent and the servant. “We must have no folly now, or we shall all swing. Give me the crossbow, I say : what are you about !”

“I left it under the tree,” replied one of the others.

"I thought the beast would get away if I were not quick."

"You fool!" exclaimed his companion. "Fetch it! fetch it! fetch it for your life!"

The man turned to the door, but Ernest de Nogent exclaimed, "Stop! stop! you will bring destruction upon yourselves: if you will pause you are secure, but if you act violently you will bring certain death upon yourselves."

"Fetch me the crossbow," replied the other man, furiously, "or I'll drive my knife into you. Will you stay and hear such trash as that?"

The other man still paused, but a third, who stood near the door, instantly turned the key and threw it wide open.

"Hear me," cried Ernest de Nogent, "hear me, for your own sakes if not for mine, for nothing can save you but instant flight. Quick, up those stairs, dear Annette," he added, rapidly, and in a lower voice; "leave me to deal with them."

"No," she replied, in the same tone, "no: I cannot quit you now."

"Listen to me," continued Ernest, again addressing the men. "You suppose that you are all alone here—"

"No we don't," cried the old woman's son, with a grin, looking over his shoulder and seeing through the open door the heads of two more men whom he knew. "Ha! Tim, my boy, is that you? and you've got a pistol, too! Right, my boy, right! Give it to me quick! I will soon settle the account with this young man."

CHAPTER IX.

As the man spoke whose words we have recorded in the last chapter, there was a loud blast of a horn in the open space before the little *cabaret*, and at the same moment the old woman's son perceived for the first time that the countenances of such of his companions as had just arrived were deadly pale and full of apprehension.

Instead of giving him the pistol, the man he had called Tim only exclaimed, "Quick, you fool, quick! Out

of the back door into the wood, or we shall be taken, every one of us. There is the king and the whole hunt come up here after the buck you have been dolt enough to shoot."

Consternation instantly seemed to take possession of the whole party within; and the old woman's son, snatching the pistol violently from his comrade's hand, was the first to rush towards a door by the side of the stairs. Now, however, Ernest de Nogent cast himself in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand, exclaiming, "You are too late!"

The villain turned his eyes fiercely from him to Annette; and, as if he could read at once the feelings that were in the young officer's heart towards her, it was at her he instantly levelled the pistol, exclaiming, "Not too late for this!"

Ernest, with a single bound, sprang upon him, and caught him by the arm and the throat. A short and vehement struggle followed, in the very first efforts of which the pistol went off; but the next moment, after a reel hither and thither, the ruffian was thrown to the ground, and Ernest de Nogent put his foot upon his chest and held him down. The villain received no aid from the companions of his wickedness, for nothing is so selfish as vice; and each, with the instinct of self-preservation strong upon him, made his way towards the door which led out the back way into the wood. All were not successful, however, in reaching it; for before the struggle between Ernest and his opponent had continued half a minute, a number of servants, and huntsmen, and guards, with several of the king's officers and gentlemen, poured into the house, and two of the men were caught and secured with very little resistance.

By the time that this was completed, Ernest had triumphed over his adversary, and those around were gazing on him as if for explanation; but the eyes alone of Annette perceived that the blood was flowing from his right side.

"Oh! you are hurt," she cried, springing forward and laying both her hands upon his arm. "You are very much hurt, I am sure."

Ernest de Nogent made no reply, but pushed back the curls of hair from his face, and tried to answer with a smile. He felt, however, that he was wounded, and that, if the struggle had continued a moment longer, he

must have given way. The room swam giddily round with him, and all he could utter was, as he withdrew his foot from his prostrate adversary, "Seize the villain, seize him! Ah, dear Annette!"

Annette took his hand in hers, and supporting his arm, while one of the officers caught him as he was seen to stagger, guided him to the nearest chair. "The king's surgeon is in the carriage," said one of the officers, addressing Annette. "Call him, call him instantly," he continued, turning to some of the guards; "tell his majesty we have fallen upon a fine nest of villains here, but scarcely in time to prevent murder, I fear."

The other lady now advanced towards Ernest's side, and water was hastily sent for; but before it came Ernest de Nogent had fainted, and the blood still continued pouring from his side. A moment after two gentlemen entered, the one clothed in black and the other in a rich hunting suit, and instantly the space around the wounded man was cleared.

"What is all this?" cried the first. "Why, this is Monsieur de Nogent: is he dead? How has this happened?"

"I scarcely know whether he be dead or not, sire," said one of the officers; "but it seems that in arresting one of these villains, whom he found slaughtering your majesty's deer, Monsieur de Nogent has been shot by that scoundrel you see there. The pistol was discharged after we entered the room. You see it is in his hand now."

The man, who seemed to be unconscious that he had hitherto retained the weapon in his grasp, instantly dropped it when he heard it named; but that only made the fact the more apparent, and the king motioned the persons who surrounded him to remove the person they had captured.

Annette's heart was aching as it had never ached before in life; but her eyes were tearless, and she only said in a low voice, addressing the person in black, who, she clearly saw, was the surgeon spoken of, "Oh! help him, sir, if it be not too late."

"No," said the surgeon, in a mild tone, "no, he is not dead, mademoiselle, he has only fainted; but that will do no harm; we shall the more easily stanch the blood and examine the wound. You two ladies had better retire; indeed, all had better do so, if such be his majesty's

pleasure, except one or two of you gentlemen to give me a little assistance."

"Certainly, certainly," replied the king; and naming two or three gentlemen, whom he ordered to remain with the surgeon, he continued, addressing the latter, "I shall leave you here, my good friend, with the wounded man; but one of the coaches shall stay for you, and if he comes to himself again, let him be taken whithersoever he wishes. In the mean time we will go out, and hold the pleas of the gate before the door here, if this thunder has not brought rain with it. Allow me, mademoiselle, to conduct you from this place; there is a second carriage here at your disposal, for I suppose that you two ladies are those to whom we were told the *chaise de poste* belongs which we saw but now broken in the wood."

Annette merely bowed her head coldly, and the other lady replied, "The same, sire."

These words first called the attention of the king towards Annette's fair companion, and he seemed more struck with her appearance than with that of Annette herself.

"This is strange!" exclaimed the king. "Why, beautiful lady, am I right or wrong? Surely this is a face well known to me in other days as that of the coldest and the cruellest of all the court of France; who, with all hearts breaking for her, has remained so many years in vestal seclusion?"

"So many years, sire," replied the lady, "so many years, that even the nine days' wonder has gone by with the little beauty that your majesty so flatteringly remembers. I can assure you, sire," she added, with a faint smile, "that the suiters whom your majesty alludes to are not very importunate nowadays, and find it very easy to forget. But I will beseech your majesty to suffer one of the royal carriages to convey myself and this young lady on our road to Chartres, whither we were going when we were stopped by an accident to the carriage."

"May I ask the young lady's name?" said the king, leading Annette onward into the open air: "to judge from finding her here, in such close companionship with my young friend, Ernest de Nogent, I should suppose that this was that Mademoiselle de St. Morin of whom I have heard so much."

"Monsieur de Nogent," replied the lady, unwilling to come to the point, "has not been with us at all till within these five minutes, sire. Passing the inn, he found us attacked by these men, with the intention of robbery, and, I believe, murder, and he came to our assistance like a gallant gentleman. His servant, there, can tell you more of the facts."

"But is this or is this not Mademoiselle de St. Morin?" said the king, who was not to be led away from his object.

"That is my name, sire," said Annette, coldly but decidedly; and thinking more at that moment of Ernest de Nogent than even of her own situation, she cast down her eyes upon the ground and remained silent, taking no farther notice of the king, nor even displaying any of that sort of agitation from his presence which she might have experienced under other circumstances, and which, more than anything else, would have excited the interest and caught the attention of the monarch.

Louis was anything but pleased; but he determined, at all events, to bring her to Paris, whether she would or not; and he therefore replied to the other lady's request that he would send them to Chartres by saying, "I fear, mademoiselle, that I must alter your destination. The trial of these men will immediately take place; your evidence must be given, and that of Mademoiselle de St. Morin; I must therefore beg you to return upon your steps with me. Mademoiselle de St. Morin I shall immediately place under the charge of Monsieur de Castelneau, who, I understand, is her guardian, and you shall yourself be conveyed to whatever place you think fit."

The lady replied at once with an air of decision and dignity, which had its effect even upon Louis, "As it is absolutely necessary, sire," she said, "that Mademoiselle de St. Morin should not be left without a proper female companion, I shall accompany her till she is safe under the care of Monsieur de Castelneau, and then proceed to my own hotel in Paris."

The king bit his lip; but he knew that the lady spoke according to the rules of that court etiquette and propriety which he had strangely and inconsistently endeavoured to keep up, together with the utmost licentiousness of morals and horrible depravity in himself and in his courtiers. He therefore merely bowed his

head, saying, "So be it, madam; you are quite right;" and a few drops beginning to fall from the clouds at that moment, he took advantage of the fact to break off any farther conversation by saying, "It rains; we had better betake ourselves to the carriages. See that those men be brought with all speed to Paris, and lodged in the Châtelet. Some of those gentlemen must ride who were promised places in the coaches. Monsieur Antoine, see these ladies to the second coach. The hunt has led us so far, we must drive for an hour or two by night, though the storm seems coming on rapidly."

Thus saying, the king advanced with a slow step towards his own carriage, and took his seat therein, while Annette and her fair companion—led through the crowd of men, horses, and equipages which always followed Louis XV. on his hunting expeditions, and which now surrounded the house and filled the little space before it—approached the side of the vehicle that was destined to convey them on their way.

The king had by this time perfectly forgotten the wounded man, but so had not Annette de St. Morin, and her heart yearned at that moment to go back into the inn. To do so was indeed impossible; and there were feelings in her bosom which made her voice tremble and her cheek burn while she said, in a low tone, to the gentleman who accompanied them, "I would fain know before we depart what is the situation of Monsieur de No-gent."

It was an old man to whom she spoke, with all the habits and airs of a court about him; with the habitual courtesy of the body and the tongue, but without that real courtesy of the heart which gives life to the other. The moment he heard Annette's question, he put on a look of interest which he did not feel, and assured her, in a sweet tone, that the young gentleman was better, although he knew no more of the state of Ernest's wound than she did.

The other lady, however, with a woman's clear-sighted eye, saw more of the feelings which were passing in her young companion's bosom than Annette suspected, and she instantly said aloud, in as easy and courtly a tone as that of the courtier, "But we would fain have the last intelligence. This young gentleman has been wounded severely in our defence, and Monsieur Antoine is too gallant and polite a nobleman to refuse two ladies, who

beseech him to go back to the inn and bring them the surgeon's report."

Again Monsieur Antoine bowed low, and looked sweet, and shrugged up his shoulders, but at the same time he pointed to the royal carriage; and as he never did anything that was not agreeable to him, replied, "But the king, madame! the king! It is impossible to detain his majesty."

"I will go!" said a young gentleman who stood near, and in whose bosom—though perhaps it contained the seeds of many a vice—youth still kept alive some store of kindly and generous feelings. "I will go, madame, and will overtake you in a moment if you will proceed."

There was no possibility of farther delay, and Annette entered the carriage with a heavy heart. Her fair companion followed, and endeavoured to console her by a few whispered words. Monsieur Antoine and another old courtier filled up two places more, and the vehicle moved forward in the royal train. The moments seemed long to Annette; but it was, indeed, a marvellously short time that elapsed ere a horseman rode up to the side of the carriage, and, putting down his head, the young officer who had undertaken the inquiry said, in a tone of interest, "He is better! he is much better! They have extracted the ball, stopped the bleeding, and he is better."

"I told you so, mademoiselle," said Monsieur Antoine, as if Annette should have believed his empty reply at once. "I told you so, but you would not credit me."

Both the gentlemen had addressed Annette, and not her companion; for both felt instinctively that in her bosom there was a deeper interest towards Ernest de Nogent than that which had actuated her companion in urging the inquiry. But the tidings which were now given proved so great and happy a relief to the poor girl, that she heeded little the discovery of her feelings. She refrained, indeed, from shedding tears till the sun went completely down, which took place not long after; but to weep was the strongest inclination that she felt at the moment when hope was reawakened in her bosom by the young officer's report. When darkness did cover the earth, she gave free course to the silent drops of many mingled emotions, and felt soothed and relieved by the indulgence. No one saw that she wept; but both the old courtiers, who occupied the other side of the

carriage, perceived that she was grave and sad, as well as the lady who accompanied her, and they strove by idle chattering to amuse and interest her. Both soon found that the attempt was vain; and Monsieur Antoine, to whom his own ease was everything, gave himself up to a quiet sleep, while the other, whose tongue nothing could hold in bonds, went on to the end of the journey talking, with no one attending to him.

CHAPTER X.

It was nigh ten o'clock when the royal carriages stopped at the king's private entrance to the chateau of Versailles; and after the monarch himself had entered, the door of the vehicle in which Annette had been placed was opened, and the two gentlemen descending, offered their hands to assist her and her companion.

Annette knew not where she was, but still an instinctive dread of the court of Louis XV. made her turn towards the lady who accompanied her, saying in a low voice, "Pray, pray, do not leave me!"

"I would sooner lose my life," replied the other, in the same tone. "I know not whether it will be necessary to alight at all. The king said that we were to be conveyed to the house of Monsieur de Castelnau," she continued aloud, "and perhaps we may be permitted to go there at once."

"The king waits you, madam, in the first saloon," said a gentleman advancing from the palace; and knowing well that there was no possibility of resistance, the lady led the way, followed by Annette. The two old courtiers conducted them forward with a grin; and in the second of the long suite of rooms occupied by the monarch they found Louis himself, surrounded by a large body of gentlemen and attendants, who, at a sign made by the king, as he saw the two ladies approaching, fell back on either side, and left open for them the space before him. The room was full of lights, and to the eyes of Annette the worn and enfeebled expression of the monarch's countenance was ghastly and revolting; and certainly the fatigues of the chase, and the

long and dusty ride which he had undergone before he betook himself to his carriage, had not served in any degree to diminish what was disagreeable in his appearance.

On the other hand, Annette was pale with agitation, fatigue, and fear. She was closely wrapped up in a travelling dress, which all that she had gone through after the accident to the *chaise de poste* had soiled and discomposed, and, moreover, the traces of recent tears were apparent on her cheeks, so that every circumstance combined to take as much away as possible from her natural beauty.

Louis gazed upon her as she approached with no slight surprise; his lip turned down at the corner, and he gave a glance to one or two of those who stood around him; but still, when not moved by passion, the king could display, at least, the manners of a gentleman, though there was always a cold and icy repulsiveness in his demeanour, which characterized the monarch who is said never to have entertained a sincere affection for any one.

"I have given you the trouble of alighting, ladies," he said, "to know if I can do anything to serve and assist you; or if you will take some refreshment before you proceed on your way."

Annette suffered her companion to speak for both, and remained gazing coldly and thoughtfully upon the ground. The other lady acknowledged the king's kindness, and replied, "I believe the only assistance your majesty can give us is to suffer the royal carriage which brought us hither to convey us to our journey's end; and as repose is more necessary to us than refreshment, we will retire as soon as you will graciously permit us to do so."

"I have given orders that fresh horses should be provided to convey you to Paris, mademoiselle," replied the king: "the house of Monsieur de Castelnau is quite the other side of Versailles—such is his horror of the court—and as you pass you can deposite this fair lady there. I dare say the carriage is by this time ready."

The lady did not venture upon another word, but with a low reverence quitted the royal presence with Annette. They had scarcely left the anteroom, when the king turned to those around him with a dull, sneering countenance, saying, "What think you, gentlemen, of this marvellous beauty, who has fired the hearts of so many

people in Quercy! They must be very inflammable people there to be so easily alight!"

A loud laugh, of course, followed the king's remark; and as his opinion of Annette's beauty was very clear, every one hastened to cry it down. One declared that she was positively ugly; another remarked upon her being as white as a sheet; another said that her eyes were red; another, that she was awkward; another, that she had no form or symmetry; another, that there was no life in her. There was many a dull jest spoken, and many a coarse or blasphemous expression used; and when the king, who stood coldly by and heard the whole, had sated his apathetic mind with ribaldry, he gave his courtiers an intimation that he wished to be alone, but beckoned his valet Lebel, who had been standing behind him, to follow him to his cabinet.

"Well, Lebel," said the monarch, as soon as the door was closed, "what think you of this wonderful piece of perfection that we have had so much trouble in bringing to Versailles?"

"That she certainly is not worth the trouble," replied Lebel.

"Why, she is positively ugly!" said the king.

Strange to say, however, this was one of the subjects on which Lebel made it a point of conscience to speak truth.

"No, sire," he said, "by your majesty's gracious leave, she is handsome, but she is as cold as a piece of adamant! She is a statue of ice."

"Then, by my gracious leave," said the king, smiling, "she may be handsome for me; for I never wish to see her face again."

"Oh! her beauty is nothing very extraordinary," answered Lebel, "even if she were as warm as the first of August. She is in no respect worthy to tie the Lange's shoe."

"Ay! by-the-way," exclaimed the king, "I had forgotten what you said; remind me to-morrow."

"And, in the mean time," said Lebel, "I suppose your majesty does not care how soon this lady goes from the court?"

"Not I!" replied the king; "but what is it to you, Lebel? What have you to do with it?"

"Why, sire," replied the valet, "I can see that Monsieur de Choiseul fancies that all the business at Michy

was my doing, and is very angry with me on that account, because his nephew is in love with the lady, though I cannot but think that Monsieur de Choiseul might do better than meddle where your majesty is concerned."

"He might," answered the king, with a cold smile; "and where you are concerned too, Lebel; but, still, Monsieur de Choiseul is too valuable a man to part with, even for a *valet-de-chambre*."

"Oh! far be it from me, sire," replied Lebel, "to dream of such a thing, or to wish any harm to Monsieur de Choiseul, who is certainly one of the greatest ministers that ever appeared; but I only thought, if your majesty permitted me to notify to Monsieur de Choiseul that the Count de Castelneau and family might depart, it would turn aside the duke's indignation from me, and make him look upon me more favourably."

"He shall do thee no harm, Lebel," replied the king; "and as to the rest, you may do as you will. I care not about the count's stay, now that the girl has been brought to Versailles in spite of his opposition."

"I thank your gracious majesty," replied the valet; "it may do me a great service with the duke."

"Why, you do not seek to be a financier, do you?" replied the king; "but come, I must to bed, for I am tired. Bring me a cup of coffee, and call one of the pages to read me to sleep."

"Will not coffee heat your majesty?" said Lebel: "chocolate is more nourishing."

"Well, then, let it be chocolate," replied Louis.

While this conversation was passing in the palace of Versailles, and while Lebel, who had, in fact, entered into a regular compact with the Count Jean du Barry and the infamous Mademoiselle Lange to raise the latter to the station of a royal concubine, was adroitly removing from her path all chance of rivalry—for thus are kings managed and deceived—Annette and her fair companion were conveyed on their way towards the dwelling of the Count de Castelneau; and a brief but eager conversation took place between them.

"Dearest Annette," said the lady, "for reasons that you will one day know, I should wish you to say as little about me to your kind guardian as possible; and, indeed, unless it be absolutely necessary, not to give any account of the course we have pursued upon our various journeys."

Annette was startled and surprised. "Oh! dear lady," she exclaimed, "you surely would not have me conceal anything from one who has ever been more than a father to me!"

"It is because he has been a father to you, Annette," replied the lady, in a sad tone, "that I would have you be cautious in what you say. For his sake, and for yours too, it would be better that he should not drive inquiry too far; but still, Annette, I will not tell you to conceal anything; for God forbid that I should teach you to forget the noble frankness which he has inculcated. All I mean is this, that with regard to me and mine, and you also in many respects, dear Annette, the less Monsieur de Castelneau knows the better for us all, at least till some change has taken place in this court and country. Act, then, as you will."

"I have so little to tell," replied Annette, after a moment's thought, "that whatever I say I suppose can do but little harm. I know you, lady, by no other name than Mademoiselle Louise. With regard to our journey, I am only acquainted with the names of two places on the road, Meulon and Houdain; though I knew, indeed, that we were going to Chartres when we were stopped."

"That can do but little harm, my dear child," replied the lady. "So now, my Annette, farewell. Remember me! love me! for I trust I am deserving of your love."

"Oh! that I will ever," cried Annette, throwing her arms around her, "that I will ever, most truly and most sincerely; for, though I cannot tell why, I felt from the first moment I saw you that I could love no one else so well."

The lady smiled, though Annette perceived it not; but she replied, "The time will come, my Annette, when you will find some one to love better. Here we are, however, and I must bid you adieu."

As she spoke the carriage drove into the court of the hotel, and Annette asked eagerly, "Can I not hear from you?"

"Oh yes," replied the lady, "oh yes; I could not live without that myself now."

"But how shall I find poor Donnine, and the other servants?" said Annette.

"I will take care of that," replied the lady; "and now farewell, my sweet girl, farewell!"

By this time the bell had been rung, and servants with lights had come forth, gazing with no small surprise upon the apparition of a royal vehicle in that place. When, however, the door of the carriage was opened, and, after one more embrace from her companion, Annette herself alighted, the surprise and the joy of the servants at the sight of that well-known and well-loved face exceeded all bounds. They pressed round her to kiss her hand and welcome her home; and then one of them darted away before her to the Count de Castelneau, exclaiming, "Oh, she has come, my lord! she has come!"

The count asked not who, for his heart told him at once; and in another minute Annette was clasped in his arms.

"My dear, dear child!" he cried, "my own sweet Annette!" and he kissed her with a tenderness and warmth which he had not ventured to indulge in for many a day before he quitted Castelneau. But at that moment of joy and thankfulness for her safety, every better principle was awake in his heart, and he felt towards Annette more than ever as her father. No other image was present to his mind, no remembrance of aught else on earth but that the dear child—the well-loved nursling whom he had fondled in her infancy—was there beside him, after many perils and a long separation; and in the presence of such feelings even the habitual aspect of cold stoicism which he had worn for many a long year melted away like snow beneath the sun. His eyes actually filled with tears, and he gazed in her face as if he could never behold her long enough.

"You are pale, my Annette," he cried, at length; "you are fatigued, and you have been weeping too. Oh! tell me, tell me if you are safe, and well, and happy."

"Oh yes!" she cried, with one of her bright smiles; "I am well, only very weary; and both safe and happy, because I am with you; though I own I am very anxious for a gentleman who has risked his life to save mine, and has been terribly wounded in so doing."

"What is his name? what is his name?" demanded the count. "I shall be ever grateful to him."

"He is the son of the Baron de Nogent," replied Annette.

The count cast his eyes down upon the ground, and mused for a moment or two in silence. "Fate," he

murmured to himself at length, "there is certainly such a thing as Fate! Well, my Annette," he continued, casting off the cloud again, "you shall not tell me your tale to-night; I see weariness in those dear eyes and that pale cheek; and some slight refreshment and some good repose must precede everything else. I will master my curiosity and impatience until then; but I shall be up early to-morrow to hear the whole; and as it may be necessary, perhaps, to take some sudden resolution of much importance, I will have everything prepared for whatever course it may be requisite to pursue."

Notwithstanding the count's determination to bridle his curiosity, as usually happens in such cases, much more was told ere he and Annette parted for the night. It was told, indeed, in a desultory manner, while she was taking some refreshment, of which she stood in great need; but, to say the truth, though her communication was out of all form and order, there was very little left to add on the following day. That Annette had seen the king, and had been brought by him to Versailles, grieved and perplexed the Count de Castelneau. The story of the lady who had rescued her from the chateau of Michy afforded him another subject of deep and intense thought. The share which Ernest de Nogent had taken in the matter also affected him in a different manner, but not less profoundly; and for many hours after Annette had retired to rest, the count remained in the saloon, either leaning his head upon his hand and gazing at vacancy, or walking up and down the room with slow and irregular steps, asking himself the ever-recurring question of "What next?"

CHAPTER XI.

It was about six on the following morning when Annette awoke from a sweet and refreshing sleep, with sensations which such a sleep should entirely have cleared away. They were sensations of apprehension, of vague and indistinct alarm in regard to some terrible occurrence. Starting up, she looked wildly around her,

and it was some time before she could recollect where she was or what had lately taken place. Though she still felt somewhat fatigued from her journey, the aspect of the strange room in which she was lying, and the memories that crowded fast upon her mind, prevented her from falling asleep again, and she soon after rose and began her toilet.

She had scarcely commenced, however, when the sound of feet hurrying hither and thither attracted her attention, and in a moment or two after some one knocked at her chamber door. When she opened it she found a servant, whose face expressed great consternation, and who informed her that the count had been just discovered still sitting in his chair in the saloon, in one of those terrible fainting-fits which had first attacked him at Castelneau.

Annette instantly hastened down, and found him just recovering some degree of consciousness, under the care and skill of the faithful old servant who had accompanied him from Quercy. In a few minutes afterward the surgeon, who had remained also in attendance upon him ever since his first illness, joined the party likewise, and proceeded with the greatest promptitude to apply remedies which soon restored his speech.

An order was immediately given by his medical attendant to carry him to his bedroom; but the count raised his hand, saying, in a low voice, "That is needless, my good friend, for I must depart as speedily as possible for Castelneau."

The tone in which he spoke was firm and determined; and the surgeon, who was not unaware of the many anxieties which had lately been pressing on his mind, gazed in his face with a look of apprehension and inquiry, but read there a resolute purpose that was not likely easily to be shaken.

"My dear sir," he said, speaking low, "I can comprehend your motives; but if you persist in going directly, your life will be the sacrifice. Give me five hours, and I think I can so prepare you that you may set out at the end of that time in comparative safety. If you go now, you die; and then Mademoiselle de St. Morin is without any protection."

"But that of God," said the count. "Five hours, however, my good friend, may render the whole too late. What o'clock is it now?"

"Not yet seven," replied the medical man; "the king rarely, if ever, comes forth till twelve, and while we are doing the best for you that we can, everything may be made ready. You must feel, sir, that it is impossible you should go at present."

"Perhaps it is," said the count, faintly, "perhaps it is;" for the very exertion he had made in speaking had wellnigh exhausted the little strength which had been regained.

He was accordingly borne to his chamber and placed upon his bed, although he would not suffer himself to be undressed; and there the surgeon, knowing how strong were his determinations when once taken, applied himself by every means to restore bodily powers, even of an artificial kind. In about four hours a great improvement was manifested, and the count sent Annette away from him to hasten the preparations for their journey. She had scarcely reached the saloon, however, and was speaking with a servant at the door, when another domestic came up in haste, announcing the Duc de Choiseul.

Annette turned very pale, for she knew nothing of that personage except that he was the king's chief minister, and was considered all-powerful in France. The carriages, she was well aware, were all ready in the courtyard, and the servants busy in packing them for departure; and, at the same time, she had gathered from various words which had lately passed that the king had prohibited the Count of Castelnau from quitting the court, and had never recalled that prohibition. She was not a little alarmed, therefore, at the announcement of the duke's visit; but she had no time to think; for, with the usual rapidity of all his movements, Monsieur de Choiseul came close upon the servant's steps, and the moment after his name was pronounced he was in her presence.

He addressed her not only with courtly grace, but with a tender and kindly tone, which relieved her greatly, taking her hand as if she had been an old friend, and raising it with respectful gallantry to his lips.

"I see carriages preparing in the court," he said, after a few preliminary compliments had been spoken: "may I ask if they are for your departure or for that of the count?"

Annette was silent for a moment, but it was not because she contemplated anything like equivocation, al-

though the words of the duke might seem to throw an evasion in her way. It was, in fact, from a feeling of reluctance to speak at all that she paused; but when she did speak, she spoke the plain, straightforward truth.

"They are for the departure of all," she replied; and, when she had uttered the words, she gazed with a somewhat anxious and inquiring expression in the face of the Duc de Choiseul, expecting to see surprise and anger manifest themselves at once.

The duke, however, merely smiled, with a shake of the head, saying, "I have been forestalled! I suppose the count has had a message from the court this morning!"

"No, my lord," replied Annette, "there has been no message. Monsieur de Castelneau has been very ill this morning, so as to give me serious alarm, and he is even now lying down to gather strength for his journey; but I can convey to him any communication that you may think fit to make."

"This is strange," said the duke, in a musing tone; "but the truth is, Mademoiselle de St. Morin, in order to merit the reputation of a good politician, whenever there is unpleasant news to be communicated to a friend, I send a messenger for that purpose; but when the news is pleasant, I sometimes carry it myself. In the present instance, knowing very well that the count has a strong disinclination to remain at the court, and a still stronger disinclination that you should remain here, I thought it might be agreeable to him to receive the king's permission to return to Castelneau; and, consequently, as soon as the intimation reached me, I hastened to convey it to him in person."

Annette's whole countenance beamed with joy, and she exclaimed, "Oh! let me tell him immediately: it will make him so happy to hear it, for he was resolved to go at all events; and when you asked me about the carriages, I—I—"

"You were afraid of doing mischief," said the duke at once, "and yet were too sincere to attempt to deceive me! Dear lady, you are both the worst and the best politician in the world."

Annette blushed deeply at his praise, which she felt to be praise of no slight value; and the duke added, "Go to the count, Mademoiselle de St. Morin, present to him my best wishes, give him the king's permission, and say that

I will not intrude upon him just now, as he is both so ill and so eager to depart. I must write to him, I suppose, though I would have preferred a few moments' conversation. You must come back to me, however, fair lady, yourself; for I cannot forego the pleasure of your society for some little while longer before I go to the dull business of the cabinet."

Annette made him a graceful reverence in return to the compliment, but she did not blush at it as she had blushed at his former praise, for it seemed to her that his words were now merely those of courtesy; and she accordingly left him to convey the tidings she had received to her guardian.

When she was gone the duke took two or three meditative turns up and down the room with a quick, long step, and murmured to himself, as if he had just come to an important conclusion, "Yes, she is very beautiful, and very charming, and very good also: I do not wonder at the boy being in love with her. Well," he continued, "it is no bad thing either, if she be wealthy as they say, for Heaven knows I have no wealth to give them, and the house of Nogent sadly wants recruiting in its finances. It were no bad thing, indeed, if all the rest be right; but it is strange I cannot recall the name."

Again he mused, and again he traversed the room in the same manner as before; but, whatever was the result of his reflections, he did not give voice to it in the present instance, but remained silent till Annette returned. When she did appear he advanced kindly to meet her, saying, "Well, sweet lady! what says the count?"

"He thanks you most sincerely, my lord," replied Annette; "but farther I must give his reply in his own words. He says, as the king has graciously permitted him to go, he will stay a little longer—"

"Although," added the duke, interrupting her, "he would doubtless have made the more haste to go if the king had not given him permission. It is seemingly a very treasonable paradox, my fair friend, which, nevertheless, I understand better than you do."

"But he added a condition," said Annette, "which was as follows: He would stay a little longer, he said, as the surgeon thought it absolutely necessary for his recovery, if you would kindly undertake that the permission to go should not be withdrawn."

"I think I can manage that for him," replied the
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duke : "but, in order to do so, my dear young lady," he added, taking her hand, "I must exclude you altogether from our gay court."

"Indeed, my lord," replied Annette, "I have not the slightest wish to mingle with it, and shall esteem it a privilege to remain away. It cannot love me less than I love it."

"Nay," answered the duke, "it is for fear that it should love you too well that I would keep you from it."

"Or for fear that *I* should like it too well?" asked Annette, with a gay smile.

"No!" answered the duke, gravely; "no, my dear young lady, I fear not that at all; but you must recollect that I understand these things from long practice and somewhat sad experience; and I think that if you were to appear there often, ay, even once, you might be more appreciated than you were last night, and might be obliged to stay when you would willingly be away. I do not know whether I make myself fully understood."

Annette looked gravely down upon the ground, and remained for a moment or two in thought. She then answered, "Perhaps I do not fully comprehend, my lord; and it may be better for me not to do so. It is quite enough for me to rely implicitly on your good judgment, and to feel not the slightest inclination whatsoever to set my foot within a palace walls again."

"I really do believe, dear lady," replied the Duc de Choiseul, "that the two people who of all France can most sincerely make that declaration are in this room together."

"You must add a third, my lord," replied Annette; "for I am sure with my guardian it is the same."

"True," answered the duke, "true; he has proved it by nearly twenty years' absence, which has seemed strange to us all; for there was a time when no man loved better the court, the crowd, the city. He enjoyed them all, I have heard, much, though in a philosophical spirit; but then suddenly he abandoned them altogether, and plunged into the retirement of the country."

"He must ever have been fond of rural pursuits," said Annette: "and I, my lord, have been educated so much in the same taste, that, being but little of a philosopher, I fear I could never find sufficient amusement in speculating upon the characters of my fellow-creatures to compensate for the enjoyment of nature."

∴ The duke laughed, and replied "I am afraid that my taste differs somewhat from yours; I love the country, and can enjoy it much; but I love society also. I am fond of frequent and continual intercourse with the intellectual portions of nature. They, in fact, afford me a peculiar sort of the picturesque; I can see mountains and valleys in one man's mind; sweet meadows and calm places of repose in another; torrents and cataracts in the eloquence of a great preacher or statesman; soft-flowing rivers and bright and sparkling rivulets in the conversation of a fair lady, or the table-talk of a man of wit. These are what I may call the landscapes of a great city, and in these I take much delight."

Annette paused and mused for a moment without reply; and the duke, who was in truth examining into her character while he was himself seeking a moment or two of relaxation in the society of a lovely girl, after waiting an instant or two, demanded, "You differ with me: is it not so?"

"No," replied Annette, "not exactly; but I was thinking that the enjoyments you speak of are better suited to a man than to a woman. To see these landscapes which you mention, my lord, you must examine closely, and probably may make many important discoveries. This is all very well for men; but for a woman's own happiness, and for the happiness of those around her, it is better to take a great deal upon trust."

"You said you were no philosopher," said the duke, "and yet, Mademoiselle de St. Morin, you show yourself a very profound one: for depend upon it, that to comprehend what to know and what to leave unknown is one of the strongest proofs of a philosophical mind. Every station and condition of life has a sort of knowledge peculiarly fitted to it, and a sort peculiarly unfitted. It is for God alone to know all things, and everything perfectly; and man can by knowledge undoubtedly render himself unhappy as well as happy."

"I believe it fully, my lord," replied Annette; "and I have often thought that I would not possess those mystic powers of discerning things that are usually concealed from us, even if the fairy tales were true, and some supernatural being were to offer me the privilege; although," she added, with a deep sigh, "there are some things which I would give a great deal to know at this moment."

The tone in which she spoke, the sadness which suddenly came into it, and the anxious expression of her countenance, interested the duke.

"May I venture to inquire," he said, "what these things are? A prime-minister of France is a great magician, young lady, who can conjure up more spirits than you imagine to answer any questions he may put to them; and, let me add, that in your case he will do so with pleasure."

"Perhaps you may tell me one thing, my lord," replied Annette, with an eager look, but with a faltering voice and somewhat blushing cheek. "I am very anxious, indeed, to hear tidings of the health of the young gentleman who risked his life to save ours last night, and was wounded—so terribly wounded. They would not let me stay to give him that assistance which he so well deserved at the hands of one whose life he has twice saved."

The tears rose in her eyes as she spoke, and though she suffered them not to roll over upon her cheek, the duke marked the bright drops with some pain, not having heard the details of the preceding night's adventures, believing that Ernest de Nogent was by that time in Quercy, and doubting whether such emotion on the part of Annette might not prove unfavourable to his nephew's suit.

"You shall have an answer very soon, fair lady," he replied; "I have not been to the palace yet, and have heard but few particulars of last night's transactions; but if you will give me the gentleman's name who has thus suffered in your defence, I will send you a report in half an hour."

A servant had entered even while he was speaking, and, before Annette could reply, he placed a note in the duke's hand, saying that it had come by a messenger express from Chanteloup, on matters of life and death.

The duke instantly recognised his wife's hand, and tore the letter open eagerly. There was a very slight alteration took place in his complexion; and, as was customary with him when much moved, he shut his teeth firmly, as if to prevent any undignified expression, either of grief or anger, issuing forth through the prison doors of his lips.

"This is indeed sad news," he said, "and concerns both you and myself, mademoiselle. It is my poor

nephew, it seems, who has had the honour of being wounded in your defence."

"He is worse!" exclaimed Annette, clasping her hands together; "he is dying! the servant said it was a matter of life and death."

"No, no," said the duke, taking her hand and pressing it kindly in his own; "it is not so bad as that, my dear young lady, nor was it his life and death that was talked of. Ernest and Madame de Choiseul are both very anxious respecting you. We have all heard of your being subject to great grief and annoyance—nay, I must speak plainly—to danger, and to the risk of much and horrible discomfort, and Ernest feared that what had taken place last night might place you in a situation most terrible and trying to you. He knows that I am the only person who could deliver you from such a situation if you were in it; and he knows, too, that I would deliver you from it, if you wished deliverance, ay, though it cost me life as well as office. Ernest has been moved to Chanteloup, poor fellow, and makes Madame de Choiseul write by his bedside; but he is better, and the surgeon does not apprehend any danger."

Annette's lips moved for a moment or two with words of thanks towards Him who protects the good and the virtuous, and she then added aloud, in a calmer tone than before, "I did not know that Monsieur Nogent was your nephew, sir; but I owe him such a deep debt of gratitude, that you will easily understand why I asked even a stranger to satisfy me with regard to his situation."

"I do understand it all, my dear young lady," replied the duke, with a look of kindly meaning, which brought the blood in a moment into Annette's cheek, "and I thank you most deeply for the kind interest you take in Ernest. He is not absolutely my nephew, though I feel as much affection for him as if he were, both on account of his own good qualities, and because he is the nephew of one I love better than myself—I mean Madame de Choiseul. However, I will write him a note from the palace, whenever I arrive there, to tranquillize his apprehensions regarding you; and let me beg you to set your mind at ease also regarding him. The surgeon positively says that, though badly wounded, there is no present danger, and you know he is well and kindly tended. I will now leave you, and will only add that, in case anything should happen to annoy or distress you,

in spite of my best precautions, I not only authorize, but beg you to make use of my name at once, let the person who offends you be who he may. Say that I have positively promised to protect and defend you so long as you remain here, and that my honour is pledged to you, as a French gentleman and a soldier, that you shall be neither subjected to restraint nor insult; require my presence and assistance loudly, and that demand must soon bring about an issue which I do not think, at this moment, there is any one in France would wish."

"How can I ever thank you, my lord," said Annette, with deep gratitude beaming in her eyes; "you are, indeed, all that I have heard. There is one thing more, however, which I could much wish—"

"I understand you," said the duke, with his quick perception; "I can easily conceive that, as Ernest has been wounded in your behalf, you would wish to hear of his health from time to time. You shall have a daily report, dear lady, while you remain here; and now farewell, with thanks for a very pleasant hour."

Thus saying, he left her and entered his carriage, remarking as he did so that there was an ill-looking, though well-dressed personage, with one eye, examining the equipage with no slight attention. Common proverbs come into the mind of the great and small alike upon almost all sudden occasions of no great importance. They are, in fact, as it were, nearer at hand than any other reflection; and though the duke did think the unflinching stare of that one eye somewhat insolent, he muttered to himself something tantamount to "A cat may look at a king," while the carriage rolled away towards the palace.

CHAPTER XII.

For several successive days a servant on horseback, bearing the livery of the Duke of Choiseul, was seen to stop at the gates of the house inhabited by the Count de Castelnau. In a court such as that of France, where everything was despotic, and all men were ruled either by the absolute power of the monarch or the tyranny

of fashion, such a small thing as this could not pass without observation, and produce its effect upon many of those who bowed the knee to the one idol or the other. Previous to this time the Count de Castelneau had been regarded merely as an original, not sufficiently extravagant to be worth cultivating for the sake of notoriety, but now he immediately rose into a person of some consequence. That the prime-minister should visit him in person, that he should send a servant to him every day, argued no ordinary consideration. *Bizarre* had been the term they had hitherto applied to him; but now there seemed to be a prospect of the epithet being changed, and of the Count de Castelneau becoming *à la mode*. The courtiers called upon him, and were told that he was ill; but that was nothing to a people who, in those days, were always accustomed to die in company. So much so, that one might have fancied the Emperor Augustus was but a prototype of the whole French nation, though his last words were (according to report), "*Nunc plaudite*," and those of the dying French courtier to the society assembled to witness his end, "*Pardonnez-moi si je fais des grimaces*."

To their surprise and consternation, however, the gentlemen who called were refused admittance on account of the count's illness. This was received as a new proof of his absurd eccentricity, and they generally shrugged up their shoulders as they quitted the courtyard, saying, "*Il a voyagé en Angleterre, pays d'originaux où on meurt presque seul*," which, being interpreted, means, "He has travelled in England, that land of originals, where people die almost in solitude."

Frenchmen, however, soon get tired of anything that is unsuccessful, and the Count de Castelneau was not destined to be long troubled by the importunity of visitors at his gate. The tidings, however, of the frequent appearance of the Duke of Choiseul's servant in his courtyard spread farther, and produced other results than those which we have already displayed. There was no exception, as we have seen, to the perquisitions of the police: everything was reported there that was done, either by the king or the artisan, if it could be discovered, at least, by the manifold eyes of that unsleeping Argus. The news, therefore, of these frequent couriers reached Pierre Morin, who, during the long-protracted illness of the lieutenant-general, which took place about this time,

carried on the whole important functions attributed to the superior office.

To him it was not in the least degree difficult to combine such pieces of knowledge as explained to him the whole affair. He had been, of course, informed at once, with a view to the most legitimate exercise of his powers, of everything that had taken place in the forest near Chartres. He divined no small part of the feelings which existed between Ernest and Annette; and he concluded, from these frequent messages, that the Duke of Choiseul himself was anxious a union should take place between them. Of this position he was as well convinced as if he had seen the inside of the notes which were sent from time to time instead of messages.

It may be necessary, indeed, to say that he did not see the inside of these notes, otherwise we might naturally suppose that he did, it being well known that every letter of any importance that passed through the French postoffice was opened and read, as well as many which were of no importance at all; for it is wonderful into what minute things that searching police condescended to pry, instances of which, equally absurd and disgraceful, might be given were it requisite or even decent to do so. The postoffice might, indeed, be considered as one great branch of the police; for there every letter, the contents of which were judged of sufficient consequence, was transcribed and sent to the lieutenant-general or his deputy, to deal with as might be judged expedient.

The couriers, however, of a cabinet minister could not be stopped and interrogated, though such of his letters as passed through the post might not be more respectfully treated than those of other persons. Thus the actual notes of the duke to Annette de St. Morin—for it was to her he addressed them—were only divined by Pierre Morin; but about the tenth day a letter was sent to him from the bureau of the post, which bore immediately upon the subject, and interested him not a little. It was addressed to the Duke of Choiseul, and was written in a hand carefully disguised, but which could not escape the keen eyes to which it was now subjected. A brief examination of the contents and the formation of the letters convinced him whose was the pen from which it proceeded; and he smiled as he read the following words: "The Duke of Choiseul is hurrying on

to commit a folly. Before he compromises himself so far that he cannot retract, it would be well for him to inquire what is the birth and family of the person calling herself *Mademoiselle de St. Morin*."

This was all that the epistle contained; and Pierre Morin's only comment upon it was, "Ha! ha! is it so, monsieur! We will frustrate you as before;" and thereupon he sat down and wrote a brief note, which he kept carefully by him till one of his most prudent and trustworthy agents returned from some errand in the city.

It may be necessary, however, at this point of our tale, in order to show the reader the whole secret machinery of what was taking place, to remove the scene for a short time from the police-office, and lay open a suite of five very handsomely furnished rooms in the *Hôtel de Cajare*. They were those appropriated to the only son of the marquis, who, as we have shown, had received distinct orders from the king not to approach within ten leagues of the court, but who nevertheless thought fit to slight these commands, and to seek all the pleasures of Paris if he could not enjoy those of Versailles.

Objects, too, of very great and deep interest to himself kept him in the capital, although he knew that it was at some risk; for, as we have shown, under a calm, quiet, and polished exterior, the Baron de Cajare concealed passions deep, strong, and terrible, which, when once roused into activity, overbore at once every habitual restraint and every consideration of his own security. Two of these passions were at that moment leagued together, and added additional virulence to each other. They were love and revenge. Love the baron had never felt before, or anything even approaching to it; and, now that it had made its sway known, it was, of course, all the more strong and overpowering. Revenge was not an uncommon guest in his heart; and though of a craving and egregious appetite, had generally been hospitably entertained and fully satisfied.

The baron was—at the moment when we must bring him back to the reader's view—seated at a table, with an extremely white hand and an extremely white ruffle, writing a note, without any very great appearance of attention, or the slightest shade of trouble, sorrow, or anxiety on his countenance; and yet there was scarcely a

man in Paris, from the garret to the cellar, whose situation was not in some respect preferable to his. He had just finished writing, when his father entered the suite of apartments which were especially appropriated to the baron. The marquis advanced, smiled, bowed low, and went through the whole manual of graces and courtesies, which he never failed to practise upon all persons, even members of his own family. The son rose, bowed with courtly dignity, and, pointing to a chair, begged his father to be seated.

The conversation then began by the marquis saying, "The servants told me, *monsieur; mon fils*, just now, when I returned home, that you wished to speak with me, and I have come immediately to know what are your commands, trusting that you may, by your last night's party, have re-established your finances, and be desirous of repaying me the twenty thousand livres which I lent you last week."

"You are too good, a great deal, Monsieur le Marquis," said the son; "but you have made a slight mistake. Every card went against me yesterday, so that my object is the exact reverse of what you suppose. It is, in short, to request that you would lend me ten thousand livres more."

"Impossible, my son," cried the marquis; "I am in the most desperate need of the twenty thousand I spoke of but now; for I have a party to play to-night with the Duke of—"

"But, my most respected father," interrupted the baron, "there is not the slightest use in telling me who you are going to play with, when, or how; for I cannot contribute a livre to your game, even were it to save you from bankruptcy."

"The same, my dear son, is the case with me," replied the marquis; "I am very sorry, but it cannot be."

"Nonsense, nonsense," cried the Baron de Cajare; "let us reason over the matter quietly, and I will soon show such motives for lending the money that you shall not say a word against it." The marquis twisted his face into a peculiar expression, which might well be interpreted to mean that nothing could change his resolution upon the subject.

"Well, well, listen," said the baron; "you yourself told me the fortune of Annette de St. Morin; you yourself first urged me to seek her hand. Circumstances

have, indeed, hitherto gone against me, but she is now almost within my grasp; and if I can proceed for one month longer, I shall obtain her to a certainty."

"Pho, my dear son," replied his father, "I tell you that's as low a card as any in your hand! The girl does not like you—will not have you; and her idiotical guardian will let her have her own way."

"I will have her or die!" cried the Baron de Cajare, in a tone which somewhat startled his father, who was ignorant that his son had a single strong feeling left. He replied, however, as he had done before,

"Nonsense, my good son, she loves another; and as she is to marry whom she likes—"

"She shall never marry him," muttered the baron, in a low tone.

"Tush!" exclaimed his father, impatiently, "you know nothing about it. In the first place, she loves him; and, in the next place, the whole interest of the Duke of Choiseul is employed to obtain her for him. There are *couriers* coming and going between the two houses every day."

"He shall not obtain her!" said the baron; "I have means that you do not know of. I have never yet failed in my determinations. Have you ever known me fail?"

"No, indeed," replied his father, "I never have, my good son, and perhaps you may not in the present instance, after all; but still I cannot help you. In one word," he added, speaking in a lower tone, "I wish you to be prepared for what may happen before long. Cajare is pledged for my last night's sitting: I am certain that there was unfair work on some part; and if I cannot make a good hit to-night, everything must go—do not look surprised—this house and everything in it."

"That is bad," said the son; "but you are foolish if you cannot stop that. Play at hazard; do not play at piquet. Then the cards cannot go against you. It is what I intend to do to-night."

"But still the luck may run cross with both you and me," answered his father; "we may throw threes or deuces when we would fain throw size."

The baron did not reply, but walked quietly to a little cabinet, unlocked it, and took forth some of those fatal pieces of ivory which have produced the death and ruin of more men than pestilence or the sword. He carried

some eight or ten of them in his hand, and laid them down before his father.

"Well," said the marquis, "what of that? I have seen dice before."

The baron smiled. "What shall I throw for you?" he asked.

"Size ace," replied his father; and immediately the son placed two of the dice in a box, shook them well, threw, and size ace appeared upon the table.

"They are loaded," cried the marquis.

"Not they," answered the baron. "I will stake my life that, let them be split to-morrow, neither lead nor quicksilver shall be found within them."

"But are they of one piece?" demanded the marquis, examining them closely.

"Entirely," replied his son. "Use them as you will, no flaw will be found in them."

"Do it again," said his father; and the same trick was performed with the same success.

The Marquis de Cajare had looked on with eager eyes, as if anxious to detect the way in which his son performed this feat, but all seemed perfectly fair.

"Come, come, my dear boy," he said, at length, "explain it to me, explain it to me. Why, we may both make our fortunes if we manage rightly."

"Yes," answered the baron; "but I must have something to begin upon. In short, you must give me one half of what you have in the house; you shall then know the history of these dice, and have as many as you want for present use."

"On my life and honour," said the marquis, "I have not two thousand livres in the world."

"Then give me them for my secret," replied the baron; and the marquis having left him for a moment to fetch the money, he remained with his brow leaning on his hand, and an expression of dark and moody discontent upon his countenance.

The business of the money being soon settled, the baron pushed over some of the dice to his father, saying, "There, with those you can throw any numbers you like; the only thing is to put strength enough in throwing. With a good firm jerk, so as to give them their natural roll, they will each come up one certain number. When you want to vary the matter and lose a little, throw them more gently, and you will find the result uncertain."

The marquis took the box, and tried several times with such perfect success, that he again felt sure the dice were loaded, and he boldly expressed that opinion to his son.

"No," answered the baron, "I give you my honour they are not loaded. The facts are these : When I was with the army in Piedmont last year, I was quartered in the house of an ingenious turner in ivory, who showed me some of these dice of his own making. Now in every tooth from which they cut these little cubes, there is one part harder and heavier than the rest ; I believe it is the outer part, but that matters not. By soaking the other side in some particular acid, which he would not divulge, the ivory is rendered pulpy and light. I have seen it almost as soft as a piece of leather. It hardens again when dried, but never recovers its heaviness ; and thus one side of each of these is not heavier than a piece of porous bone, while the other is three times the weight. I bought these things from him in case of need. I have never had occasion to use them until now ; but I intend to win back to-night from Melun and the rest the money they won from me last night, by some trick of the same kind, I dare say."

"Oh dear, yes," replied his moral and honourable father ; "with such fellows as that I should stand upon no ceremony. You may be quite sure they do the same sort of thing ; so it is only diamond cut diamond if we get a better way than theirs. But as to Annette de St. Morin, my good son, you had better give that up. You will only get yourself into trouble there, depend upon it!"

"It is to win Annette de St. Morin," replied the baron, sharply, "that I use these dice. I want nothing but money ; give me money, and I will find such means to use it that she shall be mine, even if she stood at the altar with another man. Do you think, sir, that I will suffer an inexperienced girl like that to foil me ? or a romance-reading, sentimental fool like Ernest de Nogent to stand between me and my object ? No, no : I will have her or die, if it were only to triumph over the coldness she has shown. These dice shall be employed to some purpose, depend upon it, and she shall be mine before a month is over."

"Well, my worthy son," replied his father, "I wish you all success ; but neither you nor I must have re-

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course to these little gentlemen too often or incautiously. Pray recollect that it is necessary to lose a little sometimes."

"Oh yes," answered the son; "and if we see that the roll of the dice is becoming suspected, we must be among the first to cry out upon it, and have them split in our presence: I have plenty more in that cabinet."

The father and the son smiled at each other, and then parted; the marquis returning to receive some company below, the son remaining in his own apartments to wait for the arrival of one whom we have seen before in companionship with him. It wanted, however, about half an hour of the time appointed, and the space thus left was employed by the baron in practising a little piece of sleight of hand very necessary to gentlemen following the pursuit in which he was now engaged. This was the rapid passing of the dice up and down his sleeve, and the concealing them in the hollow of his hand, even when it appeared to be stretched fairly out. He had brought this manœuvre to a high state of perfection, when one of his own servants opened the door which led from the anteroom, and quietly introduced our old friend Pierre Jean, who came forward with his usual look of cool effrontery, treating the baron with scarcely more reverence than he would have shown towards a boon companion.

"My father has just been confirming your account, my good friend," said the baron, as soon as the door was closed: "there are couriers from the Duke of Choiseul there every day, and we must stop this matter before it goes too far."

"There is but one way of stopping it," replied Pierre Jean.

"I have written the note!" said the baron; "but, by my life, if you are deceiving me in this matter, Master Pierre Jean, your ears will not be very safe."

"Come, come, now, baron," said Pierre Jean, in his usual tone of jocular familiarity, "did you ever know me deceive anybody in your life? Do they not call me simple Pierre Jean because I am as innocent as a dove?" The baron bit his lip, and the man proceeded. "Come, as I see you are doubtful, however, I will tell you more about it. This girl is the daughter of nobody greater or less than that respectable officer, Pierre Morin, the chief deputy of the lieutenant-general. Now there are few

people in Paris who know who Pierre Morin originally was. I was an old acquaintance of his, however, many years ago, and can tell you that he was nothing but a poor, dirty filigree-worker, very often pinched for his supper. In one of those fits of poverty, his wife came to the shop where I lived at that time seeking money. My master, old Fiteau, was too wise to give her any; but this Count of Castelneau, who was then Abbé de Castelneau, and a great customer of my master's, was then in the shop, and hearing her say that neither her husband nor herself minded the hunger, but it was for their child they cared, took compassion on her, and went to visit them in their garret. I saw him give her money myself in the shop, and heard him say to some of his companions that he would go. He was at that time one of those wild, half-cracked fellows who do foolish things with a grave face, and call themselves philosophers. It seems he wanted a child to try experiments on in matters of education, as he called it, though nine times out of ten he was as poor as a rat in those days, and had seldom money to provide for himself. However, I heard him talk about all this one day, and I am sure that this is Morin's child that he took and brought up, because, on the very night old Fiteau was murdered, I was sent with some money—it was but a livre—to Pierre Morin's wife; and I sat there with her for some time. The child was gone, and when I asked her what had become of it, she said a gentleman had adopted it as his own. She did not tell his name, indeed, but—

"Oh, it is clear, it is clear," said the baron; "St. Morin is very soon manufactured out of Morin; there can be no doubt of the fact: how shall I send the letter?"

"Through the post," replied Pierre Jean, "through the post. They open all the letters, we know well; but they will not dare to stop that. If you have put the thing rightly, so as to make the duke inquire, and if he be such an ass as to value birth, and rank, and all that flummery, her marriage with Master Ernest de Nogent is stopped, depend upon it."

"There is not a greater stickler for noble birth in France than the Duke of Choiseul," replied the baron. "He was so when he was Count de Stainville, and depend upon it, being prime-minister has not lessened his pride. The marriage is stopped, that is clear; the next question is how to lead or drive her to a union with herself!"

"That I can do for you too, Monsieur le Baron," replied Pierre Jean. "I can manage the Count de Castelneau, and, through him, I can manage her."

"You, you?" exclaimed the baron: "what do you know of the Count de Castelneau?"

"More than he would like any one else to know," replied the man, dryly.

"I think you are mad," said the baron: "you wish me to believe that you possess power, which you certainly would have made use of long ago to enrich yourself if it were really yours."

"Why, Monsieur le Baron," replied Pierre Jean, "a man may have power, and yet be like a peasant that I once heard of, who found a diamond in the rough, but, not knowing what it was, kept it in a cupboard, and was a poor man all his life, though he had a treasure in the house! I never knew what I am now aware of till the other day, when I found it out accidentally. Since then, I have had some thoughts of marrying the young lady myself! I should make a capital son-in-law for the chief commissary of police; for, thank Heaven, I know every rogue in Paris, and could help him marvelously in his vocation!"

"You impudent scoundrel!" exclaimed the baron, unable to believe that the man was really capable of doing what he pretended: "if what you say be true, why do you not, as you say, marry her yourself, with the large fortune which she must possess, instead of offering to aid me?"

"I have at least three good reasons, Monsieur le Baron," replied Pierre Jean: "in the first place, I am a moderate and unambitious man, and I can content myself with having always a good suit of clothes to wear, a good horse to ride, two or three good meals and two or three good bottles in the day, and some half dozen crowns over and above for my *menus plaisirs*; that is the first reason, and whoever marries Mademoiselle de St. Morin shall furnish me with means for this way of living. In the next place, when I look in the glass, I sometimes think that mademoiselle might not like me for a husband, and certainly I should not like her for a wife so well as the little sempstress up four flights of stairs in the Rue St. Antoine. Moreover, I have another reason, which, to say truth, is stronger than all the rest: there is but one man in Europe for whom I

feel anything like fear. That is good Master Pierre Morin; and it does not do, baron, you know, to be afraid of one's father-in-law. Indeed, I do not think it would ever come to that; for I believe, if he found me pretending to the hand of his daughter, he would take care that, before the priest could tie the marriage-knot, the hangman should tie one of a less pleasant kind about my neck. Oh! he is a desperate fellow, that Pierre Morin; a determined tiger as ever existed. He always was. I declare I would sooner fight five Hessians, sword in hand, than feel the tip of his forefinger upon my shoulder. It gives me a strange feeling of strangulation about the throat."

There was so much truth in what the man said, that the baron's doubts gave way in a considerable degree; and he mused for a moment or two, till he was at length roused by an application which he certainly might very well expect, but which he was not thinking of at that moment.

"In the mean time, Monsieur le Baron," said Pierre Jean, "you will be pleased to recollect that you promised me a hundred crowns for this other business: I mean, for stopping the marriage with Monsieur de Nogent. Have the kindness to pay me that; and, whenever it comes to the time for arranging her wedding with you, we will make our bargain upon that in proper form."

"Why, my good friend," said the baron, "the marriage is not stopped yet!"

"Oh yes it is!" replied Pierre Jean; "and, besides, I am in desperate want of the money."

"So am I," replied the baron; "and I do not choose to pay for things beforehand."

"Well, then, I will tell you what," replied Pierre Jean, "hang me if you shall have her. I can give her to whomsoever I like, and nobody shall have her without paying for her. I am not one of those to be used as a ladder, and then kicked down when you have done with me. Here have I told you the way how to stop this marriage, you make use of it, and then you will not pay me."

"Come, come," said the baron, who saw that the man was really angry as well as insolent, "we must not quarrel, my good friend; all I want is to have some assurance of success. You may tell me this plan, or that

plan, or the other plan will succeed, and I may find, a day or two after I have paid you, that the whole thing is flummery. For the present business, I will give you fifty crowns at once, and fifty more when I find that the marriage is really broken off. As for all that is to come afterward, we must devise some scheme by which we shall be both so bound that neither can take advantage of the other."

"Well, sir, well," replied Pierre Jean, in his usual easy tone, "we are two great scoundrels, that is certain, so it is necessary to have something of the kind between us."

The baron bit his lip and looked at the hilt of his sword, as if he had a very strong inclination to pass it through his saucy companion; but Pierre Jean went on without noticing these signs of indignation. "The matter will be easily settled, Monsieur Cajare," he said; "you shall draw me up a little promise some time or another, that, if you marry Mademoiselle de St. Morin in consequence of the information I give you, you shall bestow on me, immediately after the marriage, the sum of five thousand louis; not a denier less, monsieur. If her fortune be as much as you say it is, you can easily do that. I know nothing about what she has got, for my part, though I suppose the count will give her a good deal, and our friend Monsieur Morin himself has had the picking of too many bones not to be worth five Jews and a French peer!"

"I know very little of what she has," said the baron, in a somewhat surly tone. "My father's notary told me the other day that she had herself bought the little estate of St. Aubin on the Lot. But that is not worth more than seven hundred louis a year."

"Well, be her fortune little or great, the sum I have named is what I must have," replied Pierre Jean; "but you have time to consider of it. Give me the fifty crowns, and let me go now; for I have some friends to dine with me at Renauld the *traiteur's*."

"Where the fifty crowns will disappear in no time," replied the baron.

"Then I shall come to you for the other fifty to-morrow," rejoined Pierre Jean, whose impudence, like the Greek fire, could not be put out, whatever was cast upon it.

"Well," said the baron, "I shall then be more ready

to give them to you: to-day I am very poor. I will have the paper drawn out you talk about too," he added, with a sigh, at the idea of parting with so much as five thousand louis. "It is impossible to be too quick in this matter, for fear anything should occur to derange our plans."

"I am at your service," replied Pierre Jean, "quite at your service, whenever you like. As soon as the paper is signed, I will let you know my plan, and you will not doubt that it will succeed entirely as soon as you hear it. I would not say so unless I were quite sure. Why, I am the honestest man in the world."

While the last few sentences had been passing between the two, the baron had pushed over the sum of fifty crowns to Pierre Jean's side of the table. The other took them up, put them into his pocket without counting them, and with a hasty and uncereemonious adieu left his companion.

As soon as he was gone, the baron started up, walked hastily to and fro for a minute, and then swore, with a dreadful imprecation, that he would try all other means ere he put himself into the power of that scoundrel.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE attack of illness which seized the Count de Castelnau on the morning after Annette's arrival proved more tedious than he expected. He went on recovering, it is true, day by day gaining a little strength, and losing the sensation of faintness which in this, as in the former attack, came upon him for some days whenever he attempted to move. His mind was now easy regarding Annette, who never quitted his hotel, and never received any of the persons that called with the exception of the Duke of Choiseul, who came once to visit her for a few minutes about six days after the count had been taken ill. The heart of Monsieur de Castelnau was still farther tranquillized in regard to the base pursuit of the king, by tidings of his insane passion for the low and infamous woman lately brought to his court, which was by this time a matter of notoriety. It may be easily con-

ceived that such a relief to his mind greatly tended to facilitate his recovery; and it is not at all impossible that the fact which soon reached his ears, of Ernest de Nogent being unable to present himself at Versailles on account of his wound, might also contribute to his restoration to health.

On the seventh or eighth day he was able to come down and walk about the room for a short time, and he soon after began to speak of preparations for immediate departure. Annette had quitted Castelneau with regret: she longed to return thither, to its calm and quiet shades, and the fresh aspect of nature; but yet, when the count spoke of leaving Versailles, she fell into a deep reverie. Her mind turned towards Ernest de Nogent: she thought that she might not see him before she went; that she might have no opportunity of thanking him for all he had done for her, no means of satisfying herself regarding his health, of marking with her own eyes how he looked, of hearing how he spoke. She fancied that it might be long, very long—months, years, perhaps—ere they met again; and the thought was very heavy to her, though she would not ask herself why. The surgeon, however, in acting wisely towards the count, acted kindly towards Annette, for he strongly opposed too early a departure; and the tenth day arrived before he even suffered Monsieur de Castelneau to go for a few hours to Paris to settle some necessary business previous to his journey. On that day, however, the count departed for the capital, leaving Annette at Versailles.

He had been very thoughtful during the whole morning; for during the preceding day he had questioned his adopted child, and had heard, for the first time fully, all that had taken place from the day of her leaving Castelneau. He had made no comments, no observations whatever; and, to say the truth, had endeavoured not to meditate upon the subject at all, knowing and feeling that it was the struggle with his own heart which produced those deadly fainting fits which so shook a constitution naturally strong. He could not help thinking, however; and, though he bent his resolutions firmly to resist every inclination to wrong, to stop the first suggestions of the evil spirit, and to listen to nothing but what was right and just—so that the contest was less fierce than it had been—yet the idea of ever parting

with Annette, of seeing her love another more than himself, of even sharing her affection with any other person, was in itself sufficiently terrible to make him sad, and grave, and meditative.

He had been gone about an hour and a half; and Annette, after having employed herself for some time in various little preparations for her journey, aided by Donnine and her maid, who had rejoined her some days before, had given way at length to the importunity of thought, and had seated herself at the window of the saloon which looked over the lower ground towards the Seine. There were various moving figures in the distance, but she saw them not: there was the sound of the carriages and horses rattling along the roads close by, but she heard it not; and, shut up within the sanctuary of her own bosom, her heart was communing with itself, and trying to overcome the sort of longing and eager desire that she felt to see, if it were but for a few moments, the man who had twice so gallantly come to her deliverance, ere she placed many a wide league between herself and him.

As she thus thought, she suddenly heard a step nearer to her than she had yet heard, though the servants were working in the adjoining room; and, turning round quickly, she beheld Ernest himself within two steps of her. He was much thinner, and very pale; his lips bloodless, and his step less firm than before; but his eye was bright, and full of clear, high feeling, and his whole countenance sparkled with joy, which in itself was beautiful.

There may be clumsy merriment, but joy is almost always graceful.

The gladness of his heart was certainly not at all diminished by the sight of the radiant smile which beamed over her whole face, as, giving way at once to the impulse of her feelings, she sprang forward to meet him.

"Oh! is it, is it you?" she cried. "How happy, how very happy it makes me to see you!" and then she blushed at the eagerness of her own words; but still she would not stop them in their course, adding, warmly and gracefully, though with the blood still glowing in her cheek, "I was just thinking of you, and fearing that I might not see you before we went back to Castelneau."

Ernest had taken her hand in his, and having done so he retained it, leading her back to her seat, and saying, "I too feared that it might be so; and the surgeons became convinced at length that to let me visit you would do me less harm than continued impatience and apprehension. Oh! Annette," he continued, "I could not let you go from me without—"

Annette's heart told her plainly the words he was about to speak: it told her, too, that those words would be words of joy for her to hear; but yet she shrunk from listening to them, and even tried to stay them, saying, with a trembling and agitated voice, "But you are pale; you have suffered very much, I am sure; you must not stand by me: here is a seat."

Ernest understood it all as if by instinct. "Nay, nay," he replied, "I must remain standing, if, indeed, you would not have me actually kneel before you. Listen to me but for one instant, dear Annette, and forgive my calling you by that name; for I used it towards you on a night, the remembrance of which is most dear to me, though it was a night of danger and pain to us all; and if ever you bid me call you by a colder name again, Ernest de Nogent will never dream bright hopes in life any more."

"Oh! call me so, call me so, if you like it," replied Annette, looking up in his face with the glittering drops in her eyes, but with none of the world's guile or reserve in her heart. "Why should you not call me what you please, when I twice owe you life, and when you have suffered so much for me?"

"If I may indeed give you what name I please," exclaimed Ernest, eagerly, and with his whole face glowing with joy and hope, "I will call you my own Annette, my dear, my beloved Annette, my promised bride: may it be so, dear one! Oh, speak, speak! for I can bear no suspense."

Annette bent down her head till her fair clear forehead rested upon the hand that clasped hers. She felt that hand tremble, however; and, even in the confusion of her own feelings and the agitation of her whole frame, she thought of his sensations, of his emotion, and looking up the instant after, she said, "Yes, Ernest, yes, if you wish it."

"Wish it!" he exclaimed, clasping her to his heart. "Do I wish for heaven, dear Annette! for next to the

hope of serving and pleasing God is the hope of guarding, protecting, and dwelling ever with thee. Where is your guardian?" he continued, eagerly. "I must speak with him at once, lest I indulge a dream of happiness that may be blighted in a moment."

"He is absent," replied Annette; "he is gone to Paris; but you need not fear, Ernest. He has always told me, in fact, that he will leave me entirely to make my own choice, if there be not some strong and overpowering objection; and that cannot be the case with you, Ernest."

"I think not," he answered, "I think not. Yet I would fain see him; but, as that is not possible, let me enjoy the present."

They did enjoy the present to the very full: for the sensations which they experienced were new to both of them, and a fresh world of enjoyment and delight was open to the hearts of each. To Annette those feelings came in all their first freshness, with none of the bloom of youth and affection brushed away; and all the sensations which she had hidden from herself, all that tenderness, and regard, and admiration towards him who now stood by her side, which she had so long imprisoned in her own bosom, now that the gates were thrown open, rushed forth and almost overpowered her.

With Ernest de Nogent the emotions were indeed different, but not less sweet. He had mingled in the world; he had acted a part in the great drama of life; he had seen love in many shapes, though he had never known it himself; and, to say truth, what between the examples of the passion he had beheld, and the perversions of the name he had witnessed, he had long shrunk from the very idea of subjecting himself to feelings which he had never beheld in their purest and their highest form. But all that he now felt taught him for the first time what love really is; and the difference between that which he had fancied it to be and that which he now experienced was so bright and beautiful as fully to equal in delight the novelty, the entire novelty, with which it came upon Annette.

To dwell upon all they said would occupy too much time, and, perhaps, would not be very interesting to others. Suffice it that the candour and truth in which Annette had been brought up did not fail at that moment, and that the freshness and high tone which were

peculiar to Ernest's mind proved now a blessing to himself as well as to her. He remained there for more than an hour in such sweet discourse; and neither of them ever dreaming that there could exist any obstacle to their union, talked of the future, the bright, the happy future, with all the fond confidence of youth, and hope, and love. An accidental word or two, however, from Ernest de Nogent, discovered to Annette that he had promised to make his visit but a short one, in answer to the earnest remonstrances of the surgeon; and, as soon as she heard that such was the case, she pressed him eagerly to go. It was long ere he would consent, however; and when he did bid her adieu, he smilingly gave her a note from the Duke of Choiseul to her guardian, saying, "I am not acquainted with the contents, my beloved, but I know that it refers to us; and from my uncle's generous kindness, I am sure it is calculated to make us happy."

When he was gone, Annette covered her eyes with her hands, and tried to still the tumult of her thoughts. It was scarcely possible to do so, however, for all was a wild and whirling dream of happiness, such as she had believed it scarcely possible to feel. The words, the looks, the tones of Ernest came up before her eyes without order or arrangement, troubled all her ideas, and left her no power of calm reflection. When she did recover a little, however, her mind turned towards her guardian; and, for the first time in her life, her heart beat somewhat anxiously at the thought of seeing him again. It was not that she feared any opposition, that she apprehended blame, or dreaded even that playful jest which sometimes startles though it does not wound. She felt convinced from long experience that her guardian would be happy in her happiness; she repeated to herself again and again that she knew him too well to suppose that he would not rejoice in anything which gave her so much joy. She repeated this often, very often; so often, indeed, that there may be a doubt whether some circumstance which she could not clearly define—some of those slight traits which cannot be grasped, but which seem to convince the heart without passing through the brain—it may be doubted, I say, whether some of these had not created a suspicion that her marriage with any one would inflict some pain upon her guardian, and did not produce a feeling of timidity

which she would not otherwise have known. Certain it is that she did feel in a degree uneasy ; certain it is that, for the first time in life, she calculated how she should behave towards him ; certain it is that she fancied beforehand all she would say to him, and all that he would reply.

As time passed on she became still more apprehensive ; and when at length she heard the carriage roll into the courtyard, she called one of the servants, and, in order to lessen the burden of all she had to tell, bade him give the Duke of Choiseul's note to the count, and inform him that Monsieur de Nogent had been there. She then ran lightly away to her own room, paused thoughtfully for a moment or two, summoning all her resolution to her aid ; and then, conquering her reluctance, she went back to the saloon with a downcast eye and a glowing cheek, to tell the tale at once.

She found the count leaning upon the table, with the surgeon who had accompanied him to Paris standing beside him. The note was open on the table ; and when she entered, the pale countenance of the count, though with a shade less colour than ordinary, seemed full of high and calm determination. His eyes were raised towards the sky, and his lips close shut ; but he heard Annette's step the moment that she entered, rose, advanced slowly towards her, and pressed a kiss upon her forehead.

" Be calm, my dear Annette," he said, feeling how she trembled ; " do not agitate yourself. I can comprehend all and understand all without your speaking."

Annette burst into tears, and the count, turning to the surgeon, continued, " Leave us, my good friend. I am calm, I can assure you. It is a struggle that agitates as long as it lasts, and not when the victory is won—and it is won ! You can remain in the next room if you are apprehensive : my dear child will call you should it be needful."

The surgeon withdrew, with an anxious look towards Annette ; and the count then led her to a chair, and seated himself beside her. " You need tell me nothing, my Annette," he said, after a momentary pause, " for I read it all in your countenance. You have heard the words of love, you have heard them for the first time, perhaps, and you have been much agitated. That agitation has left its traces behind, but they are the traces of happy

emotions ; for the tears of grief and of joy are as different, even to the sight, as the dew of the summer morning and the heavy drops of the thunder-storm. You have been happy, my Annette, and so far I am happy too ; but I fear lest that happiness may have its alloy. I fear that it may be followed by pain and disappointment."

" Oh ! why, why, why ?" cried Annette. " You surely cannot doubt that Ernest is—"

" All that is good, and generous, and noble," replied the count. " I know he is so, my sweet child ; but yet, dear Annette, this world in which we live is not the holiday place that young hearts think it. It is a sorrowful school, where sad lessons are taught every hour, and I fear you have yet much to learn. I have just studied perfectly a painful task, and I am going to tell you what it is, Annette ; for it is a part of my duty both to punish myself for the past and to guard myself against the future. With you, my dear child, I have striven to deal without selfishness ; but, alas ! that sin is as subtle and general as it is base ; and, even when we think that it is most surely conquered, it finds its way in through some unguarded portal, and takes possession of the whole heart. I have brought you up from infancy, loving you for yourself. In your education I can fairly say I dealt generously with you, for I denied you many indulgences which would have indulged myself to grant ; and I studied my own faults, as well as those of others, in order to preserve your character free from errors ; but, while all this was going on, Annette, I learned to be selfish in another way—"

" Oh ! do not say it, do not say it," cried Annette : " You have never been so with me."

" Yes I have," continued the count : " selfishness, I say, took another form ; I learned to love you for myself as well as for yourself ; you became indispensable to my happiness, to my peace, to my tranquillity. It became necessary to me that the love which you had learned to feel towards me should be undivided and entire. The very thought of your leaving me and uniting your fate with another was to me as death ; and, though I struggled much to overcome it, such was the rebellion in my heart that the effort has twice nearly cost me life."

Annette covered her eyes with her hand and wept.

"Nay, dear child," continued the count, "weep not. Have you not heard me say that the struggle is over, and that I have triumphed? It is so, my Annette, and I am only telling you now what has been, not what is. That you should stay with me, my dear child, ever stay with me; that you should never quit me to become the light of another home, to bring sunshine to another roof, was not, indeed, an expectation, but it was a longing, ardent, eager, selfish wish, to repress which, to trample which down, and to supply its place with better things, has been now the effort of many months. I might never have conquered it, Annette, had I not lately felt and seen that, for your happiness, it must be overcome."

"But why need I leave you?" exclaimed Annette. "Why may I not be always with you? Why may not Ernest, by his presence, add to your happiness rather than take from it? Why may he not love you as well as I do, and you love him, both for his own sake and because he loves me?"

The count shook his head. "I trust it may be so, dear Annette," he replied; "because I hope—nay, from the calm manner in which I can contemplate all, because I am sure that I have conquered at last this selfishness of which I spoke. But if, a month ago, Annette, you had asked me that question, why I could not love him both for his own qualities and because he loves you, my answer must have been, *because you love him*. I have triumphed, however, Annette, and I have completed the conquest this very day. From the moment you told me that he had again had an opportunity of saving your life, I saw that it was destined you should love him, and then began the struggle; but I must not think of those hours. Each day since, when the Duke of Choiseul has sent to tell you of his health, it has been to me as a warning. This morning, when I set out for Paris, I felt an impression that all must be accomplished now and at once; and as I went I made the last effort, and cast the viper from my heart. Henceforth, dear child, I live no more for myself; I live for you; in your happiness shall be my joy, and that which blesses you shall bless me also."

Annette cast her arms around him and wept upon his bosom. The count suffered her to do so for a moment, but then gently removed her, saying, "Now nerve your heart, my dear Annette! I have spoken to you of my-

self and my own feelings ; I am going to speak to you of yourself and your situation. All seems happy, Annette, and fair in your eyes ; but in some far western countries, which I once visited in the wild wanderings of my youth, I have seen the sky more bright and glorious than you ever beheld it in these climates ; the sea calm and glassy as a mirror, and blue as the heavenly arch that hung above it ; scarcely a breeze stirring the foliage of the trees, and everything tranquil as the thoughts of heaven. On the edge of that radiant sky, on the very far, far horizon, I have beheld a cloud, like that seen by the prophet, not bigger than a man's hand, and in half an hour the sky has been covered with storms and tempests. The waves have risen in mountains, the trees have strewed the ground, and all has been devastation and destruction where everything had promised brightness and prosperity. Such, my Annette, such a cloud there is, I fear, in our own sky ; and now let me tell you whence it comes. We people in France are as gross idolaters as any of those which were smitten by the Hebrews ; every one worships anything he can meet with but the true God. Among the old nobility of France, my Annette, high birth and long descent is the parchment deity they adore : to it they would sacrifice every kindly and tender affection of the heart ; to it they would offer up every virtue, talent, grace, or quality that can adorn human nature ; ay ! for it, when called upon, would they slay their sons and daughters, and, as in this court, make their children pass through the fire of hell. Now, dear child, although in every other respect a generous-hearted man, Monsieur de Choiseul is one of these. So is also the old Baron de Nogent ; and with them, I fear, we have not the resource which we might have with some others : for mammon is the only deity which can tame pride, and here mammon would be of no avail. Having spoken thus, Annette, you will easily understand what are the fears I entertain, when I tell you that over your own birth there is a cloud, and that this note from the Duke of Choiseul contains inquiries on that very point."

Annette had turned deadly pale, and she remained so, sitting in perfect silence for several minutes, as if unable to speak. The count gazed on her anxiously, and at length he asked, "What shall I say to him ? How shall I deal with him ?"

"Oh, in truth and in sincerity," replied Annette, "if it cost me my life, if it cost me more than life. Deal with him in all sincerity, my dear father; let me never think that by me or for me one word was spoken which could deceive."

The count's eye fixed upon her with a glittering moisture in it, but still firm and eager. "Annette," he said, "I ask you on my own account; and in making your reply, you must remember all that I have told you of my own heart. None can judge but yourself; for I, alas! may deceive myself as to my own motives. If there were a possibility of concealing anything—of leaving anything untold which is not absolutely necessary to tell—ought I, can I leave it unsaid?"

"Nothing, nothing," replied Annette; "say all, say everything—everything even that you think; let there not be one single point to be told or to be suspected hereafter. Oh, my dear father, it may be God's will to deprive me for a time of happiness, but it can never be God's will to deprive me of honesty and truth."

The count caught her in his arms and pressed her to his heart, exclaiming, "Nor will God abandon thee, sweet child!"

CHAPTER XIV.

It was late in the evening of that day when another note was put into the hands of the Count de Castelneau. He was alone, for Annette had gone early to her chamber. The impression on the wax made him start; but, after pausing for a moment, he opened it with a firm hand and read. The words which it contained were these: "The Count de Castelneau is required, by one whose seal he will recognise, to answer, when he is questioned concerning the birth of Mademoiselle de St. Morin, that he has every reason to believe she is of a high and pure family."

The count held the paper in his hand, and gazed at it sternly for several minutes. He then tore it to atoms and cast it into the fire, saying, "I am nobly taught by that dear girl, and I will follow her example, be the result what it may."

At an early hour on the following morning a servant ran up to announce that the carriage of the Duke of Choiseul was entering the court. This was very customary in those days, when the visit might be considered in some degree a ceremonious one: a running footman preceding the carriage, and giving the name of the visiter a few moments before he actually arrived.

The count, willing to do all accustomed honour to the high rank of the minister, immediately rose, and descended to the foot of the stairs to receive him, while Annette hurried to her chamber to pass the time in tears. Scarcely had she raised the cup of joy to her lips, when it seemed dashed away by the hand of fate, and she felt at that moment as if she had tasted of joy but to know sorrow. In the mean while, the count and his guest had entered the saloon; and, after a few of those courtesies which may partake of ceremony, but which still have great influence in preserving the amenities of life, the Duke of Choiseul entered upon the subject of his visit.

"I find, Monsieur de Castelneau," he said, "that my nephew Ernest very wildly and rashly, for as yet he is by no means well, made himself yesterday, while I was absent, the bearer of a note to you, which I intended to have been sent by a servant. He had a long conversation, too, it seems, with your sweet ward, you being yourself from home at the time; and he has certainly returned more in love than ever, which may very well be, as I never yet beheld a person so completely formed to turn the heads and win the hearts of old and young alike."

The count bowed his head gravely, replying, "There is no one like her in France, my lord duke: she is, indeed, a treasure, which might well make the house of any man rich in the best sort of wealth. She has also fortune of another kind, however, having already a very noble dower, and in certain prospect everything that I leave, the county of Castelneau dying, as you know, with myself."

"That will indeed give her the dower of a princess," replied the duke.

"It will," answered the count; "but I very much fear, my lord, from the tenour of your note to me, and from my knowledge of your views, that my fair ward, with all these high qualities and all this great dowry,

may not be the bride of your nephew, Monsieur de Nogent."

"I grieve to hear it," said the duke, in a tone of real concern, "I grieve most sincerely to hear it, for to him it will be a most dreadful disappointment—let me add, to me a great disappointment also; for I never in life beheld a woman so likely to make an honourable man happy."

"You do her mere justice, my lord," replied the count; "but I am afraid it cannot be."

"May I ask the particulars?" said the Duke of Choiseul.

"Most assuredly," replied the count. "I explained to Annette last night circumstances with which she was not acquainted; I told her the contents of your note, and I asked her to decide how she thought I ought to deal with you. Her reply, my lord, was, 'Deal with him in all sincerity and truth; conceal from him not one point of all that you know or that you suspect;' and now, my lord, I am ready and prepared to act according to her wishes, which are founded upon principles that I glory in having instilled into her mind."

"She is, I am sure, most noble and most sincere," replied the duke; "I needed no proof of that, sir. The objection, then, refers to her birth: am I to understand so?"

"It does, my lord," replied the count; "but, if you have time, permit me to explain the whole."

"I have time, my dear sir," answered the Duke of Choiseul. "I have come at an early and unceremonious hour, because I do not feel at all certain that, after I have this day presented myself at the palace, I shall ever set my foot in Versailles again. That, however, sir, will not make my heart ache. I fear what you have to tell may do so severely. Let me beg you, however, to proceed."

The Count de Castelnau took up the history of Annette from the time he had first beheld her: he told how he had found her, adopted her, and educated her; and he saw by the pained and sorrowful expression of the Duke of Choiseul's countenance the changes which that tale was producing in all his feelings and sensations. When he had concluded that part of what he had to say, he paused for a moment, and the duke played thoughtfully with the hilt of his sword.

At length the latter replied, "Though it was undoubtedly a generous and kindly act, Monsieur de Castelneau, I cannot help believing that it was a pity so to withdraw this young lady from her natural station. The situation in which we are all placed by this circumstance will excuse my commenting upon what you have thought fit to do; I regret it deeply, most deeply, for my own sake and that of poor Ernest. I will not add for that of Mademoiselle de St. Morin, because I hope and trust that her happiness may be in no degree affected by this unfortunate circumstance."

"My lord, you have every right to comment," replied the count, "on anything that you or yours may suffer; and I so far agree with you in your views, that perhaps, had I been situated as I am at present, I might not have acted as I did. I was then, however, merely the poor Abbé de Castelneau. I had been reckless and extravagant, and all I could ever hope to save for the child's dowry might amount to some few thousand crowns. I explain this to you," he added, somewhat proudly, "because I feel that an act of mine has remotely and accidentally affected the peace of a very noble and highly respectable family. You must be very well aware, however, from the life we have led in the country, that I have never tried to force Annette upon any house of high rank, although I believe her qualified to adorn the most elevated station. Still I have something more to tell, my lord; my tale is not done; and you will receive what I now say, not as any effort to satisfy delusively your pride of birth, but as the truth simply spoken, in accordance with the wish of Annette, that I should tell you all I suspect as well as all I know. I do not believe her, my lord, to be the child of the persons in whose house I found her; and I do believe her to be the child of two persons both of high rank. I do not imagine, however, that her birth would be mended in your opinion, even if the fact could be proved."

"If I understand you rightly, sir," replied the duke, "it certainly would not; and I will confess, my dear count, that in all the many transactions which I have had to go through in life, I have seldom, if ever, spent a more painful hour than that which has just passed. I had hoped, rashly hoped, that it would have been very different. I fancied that the young lady might be the daughter of some of the many members of our nobility,

who, either in troublous times or in the rash days of their own youth, had lost the fortune which ought to accompany high blood; and I do assure you most sincerely, that, had she been the child of the poorest gentleman in all France, I would have courted her hand for Ernest as if she had been a princess. As it is, I am sorry to say, my opinion is fixed and cannot be altered. I know that the judgment of the Baron de Nogent will be the same. You must feel, sir, that this thing cannot be."

"I beg your pardon, my lord," replied the count, drawing himself up, with a slight degree of the sarcastic bitterness which formerly characterized his countenance appearing in the curl of his lip, "I beg your pardon, my lord; each man's feelings are his own property, and ours are as different as our estates. I know that in accordance with the prejudices of society it cannot be; but I feel also that there are men who could trample upon those prejudices. Excuse me, too, my lord, if I say that I could look upon no man as worthy of the hand of such a being as Annette de St. Morin, unless for her sake he could tread under foot a worse devil than family pride."

The duke's cheek grew a little warm, and one of his usual brilliant but biting repartees rose to his lips; but kindly feeling triumphed, and he merely replied, after a moment's pause, "Do not let us say angry things to each other, Monsieur de Castelneau. This interview has been more bitterly painful to me than you are now willing to believe; and I have another to go through this day, nay, this very hour, which must be very grievous to me also. I have, sir," he added, in a grave, stern tone, "I have, sir, to risk offending past all forgiveness a king whom I have loved and served through the greater part of my life, in order to save him from committing an act which will cover his name with disgrace forever. I beseech you, then, Monsieur de Castelneau, to let us part in peace, and to believe, when the Duke of Choiseul is no longer prime-minister of France, that he only acted as he judged sincerely to be due to his family and to the respectability of a French gentleman. It is very likely I may be wrong; it is very likely that, as you say, I may be prejudiced; but those prejudices have been so early and firmly instilled into me, that I believe from my very heart I am doing nothing but what is right."

The duke held out his hand; and his tone was so earnest, so sincere, that the Count de Castelneau could not

refrain from taking it and pressing it in his own, saying, "We have both cause for grief, my lord duke. You, more than you know of, more than you will ever know, for you lose that which France cannot parallel. But no more of this; fare you well; I am sure you will do your duty as a statesman well and firmly, and that in the cabinet no prejudices of any kind will affect the enlightened minister and the generous and noble-hearted man."

Thus parted the Duke of Choiseul and the Count de Castelleau. The duke betook him to the palace; and all France soon rang with the news that the famous minister, for opposing the introduction of a common prostitute to the court of France, under the name of the Countess du Barry, had been dismissed by the king he had served so long and well, an exile to his house at Chanteloup. On the following day and for many a succeeding week, a spectacle was beheld which Europe had probably never witnessed before: it was that of a large body of courtiers grateful and devoted to a disgraced minister. Versailles was deserted, and the road from Paris to Chanteloup was covered with the carriages of the highest nobility of the land.

These tidings reached the ears of the sad inhabitants of the house which we have seen the Duke of Choiseul leave. They produced little, if any, effect upon the hearts of either Annette or the count, for both had many a painful thought to deal with, which left them little room for the consideration of merely political things. It was a terrible task for the Count de Castelleau to communicate to Annette the result of his conference with the duke; but, as he usually did in every difficulty, he proceeded to execute it at once, and sent a servant to tell her that he was alone.

She came immediately, with a pale cheek and an anxious eye. Her first glance at her guardian's countenance showed her that there was deep grief in his bosom, and she instantly understood the cause. Her heart sank, her steps wavered, and she had nearly fallen before she reached the spot where the count stood. He caught her in his arms, however, and pressed her to his heart, saying, "Oh! my Annette, often have you consoled me, be it now my task to console you, beloved one."

Annette understood what he meant at once, and for a moment or two she wept bitterly, but she soon recovered herself. She thought of her guardian, of his feel-

ings, of his happiness ; and, wiping her tears from her eyes, she said, in a low tone, " I must feel it at first, but it will soon be over. Do not grieve, my dear father : this is one of the lessons, you know, that you told me I had to learn."

CHAPTER XV.

HOPE, never-tiring hope, still sung her song in Annette's ear. She asked herself, " Will the good Baron de Nogent, he who has treated me in every respect so like a father, will he take the same cold view of the case which has been taken by the Duke of Choiseul ?" She demanded still farther : " Will Ernest, will he who but one day ago stood by my side with looks and words of the deepest and tenderest affection, will he so easily resign one whom he vowed he would love forever ?"

She would not believe it ; and, though she did not go on to calculate either what line of conduct Ernest himself would pursue, if he retained his purposes and affection towards her in despite of his father's opposition as well as that of the Duke of Choiseul, or what her own course ought to be under such circumstances, yet she thought that certainly Ernest would write to her ; certainly he would give her that consolation at least, even if he could not find means to see her.

Four days elapsed, however, and yet no letter came, no message, no tidings. It was a terrible time for poor Annette : there was all the wearing pain of expectation, and suspense, and hourly disappointment. She strove to banish from her face the care that was preying upon her heart : she tried to smile, to look contented ; for she saw the eyes of the kind and affectionate friend who sat beside her gazing upon her from time to time with looks of sad and sorrowful inquiry. The count, however, was not to be deceived ; and now, now in the moment of her affliction, he felt how truly he loved her more than himself, and would have given his right hand to wed her to the man of her choice. Still, however, the count made no proposal to hasten their journey back to Castelnear ; he delayed it, on the contrary, for he was not without

some hope of hearing more from Chanteloup. He fancied that Ernest might have written to Castel Nogent; that the Duke of Choiseul himself might be pausing to inquire the sentiments of his nephew's father; and in that hope he waited, resolving to let the necessary time expire for a messenger to go to Quercy and return.

At length, on the fifth day, while Annette was dressing, her maid, who had been absent for a moment, returned with a note in her hand and a look of importance upon her countenance.

"A page, mademoiselle," she said, "gave me this for you, and told me to deliver it in private."

Annette took the note, opened it, and read. It was merely signed Ernest, but the words were these:

"I am in despair: the opposition that I have met with nearly drives me wild. Can I hope that you feel the same? If so, there is but one course for us to pursue—to fly. They can prevent our union in France, but a few leagues will bring us to the frontier of Flanders. There we can be married, and may set at defiance anything that all the world can do to separate us. I beseech you, I entreat you, if you would not drive me to some unpardonable act, follow this course immediately. Say not one word to your guardian or any one else, for that would be destruction; but meet me to-night in the park, close by the gate of the Trianon. You can come out as if for an evening walk, half an hour before nightfall, and can tell Monsieur de Castelneau you will be back speedily: I will find you there as soon as it grows dusk. A carriage and horses shall be at the gates in waiting, and ere to-morrow night Annette may be my bride."

She dropped the note upon the table, and covered her eyes with her hands. Was it possible? she asked herself; were such the first lines that Ernest de Nogent ever addressed to her? Was such the proposal that he ventured to make to one who had never given him reason to believe that concealment or artifice was in her nature? Oh! how had she been deceived! Oh! how bitterly, how terribly had love, and confidence, and inexperience cheated her! What, was the first thing that he asked her to do to wrong the trust and affection of one who had been more than a father to her through life? Was this the man upon whom she had fixed her whole hopes, her whole tenderness? Bitter and terrible as had been her disappointment before, it was all as no-

thing to this! Dark indeed was now the void left in her heart; for confidence was gone as well as hope, and all seemed night around her.

She wept not; but after gazing for some moments in silence on the note, she hastily concluded her toilet, and, snatching up the paper, hurried with a rapid but agitated step to the saloon, where she found the count seated reading. He raised his eyes the moment she entered; and seeing at once that something had greatly moved her, he exclaimed, "What is it, my Annette? What is the matter, my dear child?"

Annette did not reply for the moment; but, still advancing towards the table where he sat, she sunk upon her knees at his side, and laid the note before him, saying at length, in a low and trembling voice, "Read, read, my dear father! and, if it be possible, give me consolation for that!"

The count took up the note and ran his eye hastily over it.

"Yes, my dear Annette," he said, when he had read it, "I can give you consolation. That is not the writing of Ernest de Nogent."

"Oh! are you sure, are you sure?" exclaimed Annette, starting up, with tears of joy. "I could bear anything, anything but that. I could bear to lose him, but not to love him less. Oh! are you sure?"

"Quite, my Annette," said the count, "quite sure. First, those are not the sentiments of Ernest de Nogent: he has never acted on such ideas through life; and a man's past deeds are the best witnesses in his favour. In the next place, that is not his handwriting; for before you arrived I saw much of him at various times, and have seen him write. It is not even a tolerable imitation of his hand."

Annette looked up with hope and joy once more, and the count proceeded to say that, so convinced was he the whole note was a forgery, he would send it instantly to the Duke of Choiseul, and Annette should see the reply.

"Who the villain is who has committed this act," he said, "and what is his purpose, I may suspect, but cannot be sure. I am even afraid that we must let him escape unpunished, though it would be easy to take him at the gate of the Trianon; but it is necessary, on every

account, my dear child, not to call observation upon ourselves."

The note was accordingly enclosed to the Duke of Choiseul, and sent off by a servant on horseback. He returned in the afternoon, bearing a reply from the duke, which, after some few words of compliment, went on to say, "Mademoiselle de St. Morin only proves herself to be all that those who know her are well aware she is. She must not doubt that my nephew, however sad and grieved in heart, will behave otherwise than all his conduct through life has promised. It is, moreover, impossible that he could have written the note which has been sent, and given her so much pain, but which bears not the slightest resemblance to Ernest's hand. He is at the present moment more than a hundred leagues distant from Versailles, having quitted Chanteloup for Quercy, notwithstanding all remonstrance, on the day after I saw you. That he went there at once, without any alteration of his intention, is proved by Madame de Choiseul having received a letter from him by the ordinary courier from Limoges. Let me trust that Mademoiselle de St. Morin continues in good health, and that she will not withdraw her esteem from the Duke of Choiseul or any of his family; for the regard of one so generous, sincere, and highminded is too valuable a possession to be lost without deep regret."

Such was the reply of the Duke of Choiseul; and it was sweet and consoling to Annette to know that she was respected and appreciated even by those who would not take her to their hearts as they might.

The day passed over with her in greater tranquillity than it had begun; for the apprehension of a greater evil seemed, now that it was dispelled, to have lessened the load of that which went before. The count, however, remained in a meditative mood himself; and, though he continued to read during the greater part of the day, yet he often laid down the book and thought for many minutes. When he took it up again he would appear to pay but slight attention to its contents.

At length, as evening began to close, Monsieur de Castelneau called one of the servants, who had been with him for many years, and gave him some directions, which the man instantly hastened to obey. Annette was sitting in the room at the time, but at some distance, and did not hear what passed.

In about three quarters of an hour the man returned, and immediately addressed his master, saying, as if in answer to a question gone before, "Yes, sir, he came as soon as it was dark, and walked about gazing round for a little while; but when I came up, and, looking him full in the face, made him a low bow, he walked away as fast as he could, taking no notice of me at all."

The count mused for a moment or two, and the man seemed to wait for farther orders. At length Monsieur de Castelneau inquired, "Now tell me, Jocelyn, truly and candidly, as your duty to your master should be greater, in your eyes, than any other consideration, have you seen your fellow-servants, or any of them, holding much communication with strangers lately; for it is clear to me that information of what passes in this house must be given to persons without."

The man paused and looked towards Annette, and the count added, somewhat sternly, "Speak without hesitation!"

"No one, sir," replied the man, "except mademoiselle's maid Toinette."

The count was more susceptible of anything affecting Annette than if it touched himself, and he immediately replied, "If you refer to her interview with the page this morning, I know that already. She told your mistress, who told me."

"No, sir," replied the man; "I have seen her twice before speaking with a man with one eye. Old Jerome was talking to me about it; for he saw her once, also, when she did not know it, and he said it was very wrong of her to do so, for the man was that scoundrel who cheated mademoiselle into coming away from Castelneau."

"It was very wrong indeed," replied the count; "I had hoped that there was not one servant in my house who did not love their master."

"Sir," said the old servant, "if you say that to her you will break her heart. The girl is not a bad girl, but somewhat foolish."

"Well," answered the count, "I must trust to you and Jerome to send her back to-morrow morning early to Castelneau. She must not remain here any longer. Say nothing to her about it to-night, lest more evil should occur, but let her removal be carried through quietly and calmly to-morrow. Annette, my love, you

must do without assistance from any one but good Denaine till our return home, which will now be soon."

"Oh, I want but very little," replied Annette, "and indeed none. This conduct, too, of Toinette's grieves me. I have something more to tell you, my dear father; but I will do so in a moment or two, when we are alone."

The count made a sign to the servant to retire, and Annette then told him that she feared her maid must have heard her whole conversation with Ernest de Nogent, and must have revealed it to some one else. "The girl was in the next room," Annette said, "when he came. The door I had left ajar when I sat down to read, in order that she might ask me any question that she wished to put concerning those things she was packing up. Whoever wrote that note must certainly have had full information of all that passed between us then;" and her cheek began to burn at the thought.

"Yes, but neither a knowledge of your character nor of his," replied the count; "however, dear Annette, it will be better for us to go to Castelnau at once, for this man will evidently not quit his pursuit easily; and here I have not the same power of protecting you and punishing him as I should have there."

"But oh! my dear guardian, recollect that Ernest is there; and if we go immediately after we have heard that such is the case—"

"I understand you, dear Annette," replied the count; "we will wait a day or two, at all events. He cannot accomplish much mischief in that time. You know, of course, my dear child, who is the man that has done this thing?"

"I suppose the Baron de Cajare," replied Annette.

"The same," answered the count. "He has been seen waiting at the place that he appointed. What rash and daring act he would have committed, and how he might be protected in the commission of such treacherous baseness, I cannot tell; but I grieve to say that, since the fall of Monsieur de Choiseul, he has dared to present himself again at court, from which he had been banished. He has, too, I understand, been well received."

"Oh! let us go," said Annette, alarmed at the news she heard; for her dislike and fear of the Baron de Cajare had grown every hour with her affection to Ernest

de Nogent. "Oh! let us go as soon as possible. We can proceed slowly; we need not arrive at Castelneau soon; and anywhere we shall be more safe than here."

The count smiled at her fears. "Nay, nay, my Annette," he said, "he cannot do us much harm for a day or two; and, in the mean time, I will write to Monsieur de Choiseul, and tell him why we intend to return to Castelneau so speedily."

Annette's feelings of alarm still continued, and they were more just than the count's feelings of security. But to show how such was the case, we must once more for a time change the scene.

CHAPTER XVI.

"So, Monsieur le Baron! So!" cried the fat and saucy voice of Pierre Jean, "you have been trying to work with your own tools, and have not succeeded! You thought to get off without giving me my due, but you can't do it. She is too shrewd to be tricked by such as you; and you had better come to my plan soon, for if you don't I will hand the secret over to some one else, who will pay me better, I'll warrant. It was but a shabby trick of you to try to walk in by another door, while I was holding one open for you."

"It was a very natural trick," replied the Baron de Cajare, who had listened, while the other spoke, with an unmoved countenance. "You don't suppose that I will meddle more with filth than I can help, or that I will deal with such dirty tools as you when I can find cleaner instruments to work with."

Pierre Jean, to do him but justice, liked straightforward dealing; so that this reply of the Baron de Cajare pleased him, perhaps, more than anything that could have been said.

"Upon my soul," he cried, "you are nearly as impudent as I am myself. You are a hopeful disciple, truly; and, if you go on at this rate, and keep company with me much longer, you will be fit to cheat a pickpocket out of the snuffbox that he has just filched from somebody else. What! You call it dealing with cleaner

tools, do you? Forging another man's name! ay, and sending a little puny swindler of a boy to take advantage of what I told you of the *soubrette*, and make my pretty Toinette believe that the urchin was sent by me. Come, come, baron, this will not do any more: you shall either sign the paper within these five minutes, and go upon my plan, or I will lay another dog upon the track, and you may whistle for the game."

This sort of language the Baron de Cajare did not certainly like at all; and, indeed, during his latter conferences with Pierre Jean, his mind had been in a state of constant vacillation between a strong inclination to run his sweet companion through the body, and a politic disposition to be exceedingly civil to him. He was frequently even obliged to pause for a moment, in order to decide between these two very opposite alternatives. Such was the case in the present instance; but Policy put off the satisfaction of anger till an after-period, and Revenge took possession of the offence as a thing belonging to her, and handed it over to Memory, to be accounted for at some future time. The oscillations of the mind between two such temptations generally make it overshoot the exact point, and in the present instance the baron carried his civility too far.

"Nonsense, Maître Pierre Jean," he said, "let us be good friends, and work together wisely. You cannot deny that it was natural enough for me to wish to do what I could for myself without help; as I find I can't succeed, however, I will show you in a minute that it was not alone to save my money. I have been a lucky man since last I saw you, and have made my good friend Melun's purse somewhat lighter than, I believe, it ever was before; so here are a hundred crowns for you to begin with, and now we will sign the paper at once; I am quite willing to give you any security in my power."

"Why, the paper I talked about will do," replied Pierre Jean. "It is true, the secret itself is worth something; but still, as you cannot work it without my help, and it must succeed with my help—for no man will like to put his neck into a halter if he can avoid it—I have a good hold upon you in all ways. This is something like doing business, indeed," he continued, sweeping up the money; "and now let us set to work heartily. You draw up the paper, and then let me look at it."

The paper, being accordingly written by the baron,

proved satisfactory to Pierre Jean in all respects ; and, having safely deposited it in an inner pocket, he sat himself down, for hitherto he had been standing, and proceeded : " Now let us arrange our plans. You see you are to perform, of course, the part of the lover in the farce."

" I suppose so, of course," replied the baron, " as you modestly decline taking that part upon yourself."

" Why, I never like to stand in a friend's way," answered Pierre Jean, with his usual effrontery ; " however, your plan, then, in pursuit of your purpose, is to call upon the old gentleman himself, and, making him a low bow, request the honour of his fair ward's hand."

" Upon which," replied the Baron de Cajare, " he will make me a low bow, and request me to do him the honour of walking out of his house ; adding, perhaps, that I am as impudent a scoundrel as a man called Pierre Jean."

" Which, of course, you will take as a compliment," rejoined Pierre Jean ; " but you will then, in reply, say that you are extremely sorry, but if you are obliged to do so, your only refuge, after leaving his house, in the state of disconsolate attachment into which his refusal throws you, must be either the River Seine or the central bureau of police."

" Come, come," exclaimed the baron, somewhat sternly, " no jesting upon this subject ; I am, indeed, attached to this young lady, and—"

" To her fortune," replied Pierre Jean ; " but, nevertheless, you will do as I say, Monsieur le Baron ; and, moreover, you will be kind enough to inform him"—and the man spoke slowly, and with a marked emphasis—" that you feel yourself bound to give information at the police-office in reference to something about the murder of Gaultier Fiteau, the old goldsmith, for which Count H. and the Chevalier M. were executed many years ago. Tell him that there is one person concerned therein still living ; that, having discovered the fact, you are under the necessity of naming him to the police, and of bringing forward your proofs, not being in any way connected with him by blood or marriage."

" Ah!" said the baron, thoughtfully, " ah! is it so, Monsieur Pierre Jean? But how can I be certain that this will produce any effect? I must not threaten anything which I am not sure of being able to perform."

You must give me the proofs, my good friend, you must give me the proofs."

"That would not exactly suit me," replied the villain. "When I ride I still like to have the curb thrown over my little finger, even though I do not use it, and I will give you the proofs as soon as I find occasion for it. Till then they must rest with me. I will be my own witness, my good baron; but, if you think this is not enough to satisfy the worthy gentleman, and he asks any saucy questions about the matter, inquire if he recollects his walk with the Count H. and the Chevalier M. on the night of the murder of Fiteau, and all that happened afterward! Give him a day to think of the matter, if he likes it; I can trust to the effect of thought in his case. It never yet made a man who has something to be afraid of more bold to have time to think over it."

"Perhaps not," said the baron, in a thoughtful mood, "perhaps not. Conscience is the worst of bugbears, after all."

"Conscience or no conscience," replied Pierre Jean, "the expectation of being broken on the wheel does not tend to nerve a man's sinews. Tell the count what I say: the prospect will be unpleasant to him, you may be sure; and if he do not consent himself, and make the girl consent too, I am very much mistaken. If he do act foolishly, the first appearance of Pierre Jean on the stage, and a word or two whispered in his ear by me, will alter the whole complexion of the affair, depend upon it, and very soon bring him to his senses."

The baron paused for several minutes, thinking deeply over all the man had said, weighing every probability, and calculating every result.

"It is a hopeful scheme," he replied, at length, "the most hopeful scheme I have yet heard of; and if I could be certain that you have sufficient evidence to convict him, or even to cast a grave suspicion upon him, I should not in the least doubt of success; but the story is improbable. Unless, in the very first instance, there were strong proof, the accusation would not be listened to. He himself may take a high tone, and laugh it all to scorn; or, with one of his cold and cutting sneers, tell me to make what use of my information I can."

"Conscience, as you say, my dear sir, conscience!" exclaimed the rogue; for the greatest villains upon earth know better than any other people, because they know

it by experience, that particular effect of conscience, at least, which more or less makes cowards of us all. "Conscience, my dear sir, conscience! that is the thing which will prevent him from either laughing you to scorn, or from knocking you down with a sarcasm; and as to my having proof, rest satisfied that I have evidence enough; for there is another man in Paris besides myself, who seems to me as much afraid of my telling the story as if the case were his own, because he knows that he will be called upon to bear witness when he would rather not. He thought to bully me about it; but he is mistaken, and only showed his own game when he was trumping my card. I should have a pleasure in repaying him a part of all I owe him some of these days; but no matter for that; go you to the count without fear. Why should you not go at once! It is a fine day, and no time like the present."

"I should not be back in time," replied the baron. "I am to be with Melun, and Rosental, and several others by eight o'clock, to give them their revenge, they call it, but I say to take mine. I have not forgotten how Melun laughed when he thought I had not a crown left in my purse; but I will see him in the livery of a valet or the rags of a beggar before I have done with him."

"Quite right, quite right!" answered Pierre Jean; "but, nevertheless, there is plenty of time between this hour and eight o'clock. Think what a glorious prize she would be! Why, I understand that estate of St. Aubin, which you call so pitiful, is worth two thousand louis of rent. Then, if she have all the count can give, what a mighty fortune that will be. Come, come, Monsieur le Baron, make quick work with it; put on a new suit, a bold face, a stout heart, and a cool head, and go down and win the lady without more ado."

The baron smiled. "What must be done some time," he said, "may as well be done at once; so I will e'en try my fortune without more delay, especially if I am to give them time to consider of it; but I cannot help thinking that part of the plan is bad, Master Pierre Jean. The rapid decision, in the urgency of the moment, would be more in our favour, I should think. She will only hate me for forcing her inclinations, and hatred is a thing that does not diminish by reflection."

"Pho, pho!" answered the other, "that may be with

a bungler; but, my dear baron, with a sweet man like you, the good impression may be easily given instead of the bad. Why, you can teach her to believe anything you like. Tell her that you are urged on solely by the deepest and most passionate love; that her coolness has driven you to despair; that you care not what rash act you commit, so that you win her; that you would ruin and destroy yourself and the whole world sooner than not obtain her; and that she is answerable for all the sins that you commit, and the misery that is brought upon others, if she do not marry you, now that all chance of marrying the other is done away with. Woman! woman! You have but to do with a woman!"

The baron had smiled at the first part of his companion's speech, amused to find how the playing upon the weakness of human nature was brought to a complete science, which every low villain could practise; but his feelings towards Annette were in reality too vehement for him to bear calmly any allusion to Ernest de Nogent. He bit his lip, then, till he left the marks of his teeth in it; and merely muttering to himself, "She shall be mine!" he rose from the table at which he had been sitting, locked up the papers with which it was covered, and the drawer with money which he had opened, and then saying, "Well, my good friend, I must lose no time if this is to be done; come to me to-morrow about this hour, and I will tell you more of my success," he prepared to set out upon his journey.

Pierre Jean lingered a little in the room; but the baron, knowing that he cultivated the various talents which he possessed for small pilfering and other methods of appropriation in aid of his grander schemes, took care not to allow him any opportunity, and sent him out of the apartment before he quitted it himself.

Bidding him adieu, Monsieur de Cajare set out with all speed for Versailles. It was not long ere he entered the court of the house inhabited by the Count de Castelneau, and boldly asked for that nobleman. The servant who appeared in answer to his summons knew him well by sight; and—as in all houses, however carefully the masters may conceal them, all the suspicions and animosities which they experience very soon make their way to their domestics—the man now replied boldly and somewhat rudely that his master had ordered no person should be admitted.

"Nevertheless," replied the baron, calmly, "you will be obliged to admit me."

"Indeed!" said the man, somewhat startled. "I certainly cannot admit you, sir, without farther orders."

"Then go and obtain those orders," replied the baron, "and inform the count that I come upon business of importance, which will admit of no refusal or delay."

The servant obeyed, and left him at the door; but in a few minutes he returned with an order to usher him into the presence of the count.

It was seldom that the nerve of the Baron de Cajare failed him; for he was a man of determined courage, great self-confidence, strong resolution, and much impudence. But on the present occasion various things oppressed him; the business which he had in hand also was somewhat obscure even to his own mind. He had hurried on into it with an insufficient portion of information to satisfy himself fully, and he followed the servant slowly, laying out the line of conduct he was to pursue. As the best general rule he could adopt, in a case where his information was vague, he resolved to make his language vague also, and not to enter into any particulars till he had again seen Pierre Jean. Having formed this resolution, and seeing that the attendant waited at the door of a room, he hurried his step, and entered the saloon where the Count de Castelneau was seated.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALTHOUGH Annette had quitted the room on the announcement of Monsieur de Cajare's approach, yet the Count de Castelneau was not alone. The surgeon, at his request, remained with him, and this increased, in some degree, the embarrassment which the baron felt. No one could have perceived, however, the slightest trace of hesitation or emotion in his countenance, as he advanced, with a cool air and a graceful bow, to salute the Count de Castelneau. That gentleman himself certainly did rise to receive him, but with so cold an air and so stern a brow that his feelings towards his visitor were not to be mistaken. Little cause as he had to ex-

pect courtesy or kindly greeting on the part of the count, the Baron de Cajare thought fit to look upon this reception as rude and insulting; and the pugnacity of his disposition rising with the occasion, soon overcame every sort of distaste to the business before him, and he commenced the conversation at once, without waiting for any farther welcome than the mere cold bow with which the count noticed his entrance.

"Good-morning, Monsieur de Castelneau," he said: "I am happy to see you looking so well; rumour taught me to believe that you were ill."

"For once rumour was right, sir," replied the count. "May I ask to what I am indebted for the honour of this visit?"

"Certainly," answered the baron; "you shall be informed thereof in one moment. But what I have to say had probably better be said to yourself alone."

"I cannot conceive that such a thing is necessary, sir," rejoined the count: "one's surgeon and one's confessor may hear everything, I believe."

"In this instance," said the baron, "you will find, in a few moments, my good sir, that your general rule is not applicable. I must request, distinctly, a few minutes' conversation with you alone, though I think they might have been conceded at once out of common courtesy."

"The *courtesy*, sir, that you have shown to me and mine," replied the count, "has been of so *uncommon* a kind, that I might consider myself very well justified in denying your request. It shall be granted, however; and my friend here will leave us for a moment or two."

The surgeon left the room, and the count paused, knowing that silence at such a time is the most embarrassing thing that can be inflicted upon an impudent man who has to begin an awkward conference. The baron, however, commenced without the slightest hesitation.

"I have requested that our communication should be private, count," he said, "as many things may occur in the course of what we have to speak of which had better be heard by no other ears but our own."

"I cannot see why, sir," answered the count. "As you yourself have sought the interview, which, I confess, I grant very unwillingly, you must lead the conversation in what line you like, and can therefore avoid anything that is disagreeable to yourself."

"Oh! it is not that I fear at all," replied the baron; "it is not to spare my feelings, but your own, that I am solicitous."

"Indeed!" answered the count, dryly; "pray go on."

"Well, then, sir," proceeded the Baron de Cajare, "let me inform you that I come to demand the hand of Mademoiselle de St. Morin, knowing the circumstances of her birth and everything concerning her."

"You come to demand the hand of Mademoiselle de St. Morin!" said the count, repeating his words with a sarcastic turn of the lip; "may I ask upon what grounds this great claim is founded?"

"I will tell you in one moment, sir," replied the baron; "it is better founded than you are aware of. Every principle requires us to give up to judgment persons who have been guilty, at any period, of great and terrible crimes, or who have taken part therein; and there can be but one excuse for not doing so. That excuse can only exist when we are connected with the criminals by near and dear ties, and when the voice of nature and affection may be supposed to overpower a sense of justice. Now, sir, looking upon Mademoiselle de St. Morin as your adopted child, I think the person who marries her may consider himself exempt from the duty of doing anything that may injure you, although the strict law of the land may require him to pursue a contrary course: do you understand me?"

"Not in the least, sir," answered the count; "if you come here to play the part of the Sphinx, with a riddle on your lips, you must even enact the character of *Œdipus* also, and solve it yourself."

"I think, sir, it can be solved in one moment," said the baron, "and by one word. Turn your thoughts back into the past, count, and tell me if you recollect the name of Gaultier Fiteau?"

The count sat down, for he had hitherto been standing, and the deadly paleness which came over his countenance showed the baron at once that he had touched a tender spot. "I see, sir," he continued, "that you do recollect the name. I will beg you to make a still greater effort of memory, and tell me whether you remember where you were, and how employed, on the night and at the moment when Gaultier Fiteau was murdered?"

The count made no reply, but remained in deathlike
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silence, with his eyes fixed firmly on the ground. The baron, too, added nothing more for several moments, leaving what he had said to work its effect. Judging from all that he saw that the words already spoken were enough, he determined not to show the scantiness of his information by attempting to create any greater alarm; and a few minutes' reflection confirmed him, not only in acting thus prudently, but also in soothing and softening the way for concession.

"Pray be calm, Monsieur de Castelneau," he said. "I seek not to pain or to injure you; very far from it, I assure you. I deeply and devotedly love Mademoiselle de St. Morin. I would do anything on earth to obtain her, and have, perhaps, been led by this passion into rash and unjustifiable acts; but still she must be mine; and all I now ask is, that you would behave in this business, not according to the wild and somewhat inappropriate notions which you have imbibed from that mad nation, the English, but as every other parent or guardian in all France would, and give her to the man whom, all circumstances considered, it is best that she should marry."

"I cannot, sir, I cannot force her inclination," burst forth the count. "I have promised her her free choice, and were I to die to-morrow, I would not retract from my word."

"But doubtless," said the Baron de Cajare, "Mademoiselle de St. Morin herself will not drive the matter to such alternatives, if she be left to judge for herself. May I be permitted to plead my own cause with her for a few minutes alone?"

"Ay, and tell her this whole tale," exclaimed the count, "false as it is, and baseless altogether, to make her abhor one whom she has loved from infancy, and—"

"Your pardon, your pardon," said the baron. "I have told no tale at all; and if anything said be false or baseless, you cannot have the slightest occasion to fear it."

"Nay, nay," replied the count, "that follows not at all. There may be circumstances—nay, I deny not that there are circumstances—which give to the most innocent the appearance of guilt. Do we not all know how often, upon full and legal proof, the innocent head has been brought to the block, while the guilty one has escaped?"

"We do, indeed," answered the baron; "and therefore, of course, I never dream for one moment of entering into any particulars with Mademoiselle de St. Morin. I only wish to plead my own cause, and to add, in order to show some slight claim upon her attention, that your life is in my power, without in the least degree intending to make use of the means in my hand. May I do this?"

The count smiled bitterly, repeating, "Slight claim! Well, sir, I cannot refuse, but you must not ask me in any respect to urge her. You must not expect that I will make it my request even, that I will express a hope or a wish."

"No," replied the baron; "all I will ask is, that if she comes to you for confirmation of my words—if she says to you that I have told her that your life is in my power—you will reply that I have told her true: ask nothing, demand nothing of her; leave her own heart to decide; and I call Heaven to witness, if she do decide in my favour, that I will make her the best and most devoted of husbands."

The count paused without reply for a minute or two; and never did a more terrible or painful struggle take place in the breast of man than that which raged in his during his silence. It was not one feeling singly opposing another; it was not alone that apprehension for himself combated his love and tenderness for Annette; but it was that various feelings and passions took part against each other in his breast at once, and fears of disgrace and shame, affection for Annette, hatred and contempt for the baron, repugnance to sink himself in the opinion of the person he loved best on earth, and high and noble principles of what was just, and right, and dignified, all arrayed themselves on the one side or the other, and maintained for those few minutes a fearful conflict in his heart.

Apprehension, however, triumphed, more by its old and rooted power in his mind than anything else. That fear had been the bugbear of his life, the spectre which haunted him, the incubus which crushed down all his joys, and he found that he had no power to resist it now.

"It must be as you wish," said the count, at length; "but I have your promise, your plighted word, your pledge, that you will say nothing of this matter to her;

that you will give her none of the particulars ; that you will never, never call up a suspicion in her mind against me."

"Never," replied the baron ; "never, if she consents to be mine. I will say but what I have told you : I will tell her merely that your life is in my power."

"Well," thought the count, "well, I can but leave it to herself : it is a sacrifice I will not ask, I will not demand ; but if she decides for herself, why should I oppose ? Let her judge : it were cruelty to her to deny her the power of judging where the life of one whom she loves as a father is at stake."

Did this reasoning satisfy him ! It would seem not ; for, in the end, a sort of sarcastic smile came upon his countenance, as if he scorned himself for using such sophistry ; and then a look of deep melancholy succeeded it, of bitter, dark, remorseful sorrow ; and pressing his hand upon his brow, he slowly left the room.

"Pray call Mademoiselle de St. Morin hither, my good friend," he said, entering the cabinet in which the surgeon was seated. "I wish to speak to her for a moment or two alone."

Annette came quickly, and the count was glad that she did so, for every instant of expectation was terrible. Her eyes instantly rested on his countenance, and she exclaimed, "You are ill, my dear father ! Oh ! what is the matter ! That base man has agitated and offended you, I am sure."

"No, no, my Annette," replied the count, shrinking from the terms of condemnation by which she designated him to whom he seemed driven to consign her for life, "no, my Annette, no ; perhaps he may not mean—But, no, I will not say a word more in his favour," he added, more firmly. "Go to him, my Annette : you will find him in the saloon. Hear what he has to say to you, and then decide for yourself. Let no other consideration but the feelings of your own heart affect you, my child. It is right that you should have the power of judging ; but oh, Annette ! oh, judge wisely and well !"

"But tell me," she said, in an agitated voice, "tell me, my dear father—"

"Nay, nay, my dear child," said the count, "ask me no questions ; go, decide for yourself. No one can decide but you, no one can decide for you. Would to God that I could."

Annette stood and gazed at him for a moment or two in painful silence ; then turned, and, summoning all her resolution, with a slow but unwavering step she sought the saloon in which the Baron de Cajare awaited her.

For a few moments after she had left him, the words which he had spoken, exhorting her to a firm and wise decision, gave some comfort to the mind of the Count de Castelneau. For a time he persuaded himself that he had done his duty, that he had acted as he ought to act towards Annette ; but his judgment was too keen and clear, his heart too much accustomed to self-examination, for such a delusion to continue long. A brief, a very brief space of thought, showed him that he was sacrificing her to himself ; that he was consigning her to the arms of a man whom she hated and despised ; a man who, he himself was confident, would render her miserable for life. He could not deny to his own conscience that to accomplish this purpose he was employing, even while he seemed to leave her free, the most terrible means of compulsion : the compulsion of her heart's best feelings and principles, the compulsion of her affection for him. He felt that it was base ; he felt that it was degrading ; he felt that he had fallen more than ever in his own opinion ; and, burying his eyes in his hands, he shut out all external objects, and the predominant sensation was hatred of himself.

CHAPTER XVIII.

As soon as Annette entered the saloon, the Baron de Cajare advanced towards her, with a countenance from which he had banished every trace of bad passion. It is not to be denied that he was a handsome and a graceful man, and that in his whole address and appearance there was something highly courtly and distinguished ; but yet Annette could not behold him without sensations of dislike and apprehension, which certainly were not diminished by the short and unsatisfactory conference she had just held with the Count de Castelneau. She bowed gravely as he approached, but withheld her hand, though he seemed about to take it, and, seating herself in the

chair which the count had before occupied, she said, "Monsieur de Castelneau informs me, sir, that you wish to speak to me."

"You cannot doubt upon what subject, Mademoiselle de St. Morin," said the baron; "it must be evident to you, it must have been evident to you before you quitted Castelneau, that I do, and have long loved you sincerely and dearly."

"From all I have known and seen, sir," replied Annette, coldly and even bitterly, for the very profession of his love seemed an offence to her, after the events that had passed, "from all that I have known and seen, the method you have taken to display your love has been somewhat strange; but in one word—"

"Hear me, hear me first, mademoiselle," said the baron; "hear me before you make any decision."

"I have none to make, sir," replied Annette; "my sentiments were fixed long ago; but go on, if you think fit."

"Your opinions may have been formed upon wrong grounds," replied the baron; "not that I intend to deny anything that I have done; for every strong passion, if it be not a madness itself, produces a temporary insanity. Mine has certainly done so; for the strongest proof of insanity is the choice of such means as are most likely to defeat the object."

"You reason too calmly and too well for a madman, sir," replied Annette; "but whether it were so or not could make no difference to me now."

The baron bit his lip, but he still replied in the same deferential tone. "I think it might, if you would hear me to an end. In seeking your love and endeavouring to obtain your hand, I have committed many acts which were calculated, I acknowledge, at once to deprive me of your affection and your esteem; but many other things that I have done have been mistaken, and others have doubtless been misrepresented. All, however, have been prompted by love; by that deep, intense, overpowering attachment which can never be conquered; which will endure through life, and which must eventually produce some return. It is for you to direct that love as you will for the future. It is for you to address it to the best objects; to make it the means of recalling me from anything that is evil; of leading me to all that is high, and noble, and great; of turning me, in short, from

wrong to right, and saving me, by the power of affection, from all the vice, and crime, and sorrow, into which, perhaps, disappointment and despair may hurry me."

Annette was now in some degree interested; not touched, not shaken in the slightest degree, for she loved another, and under no circumstances could she ever love him; but she felt grieved for him; and his language had so much the air of truth, that she hoped he might be led to better things.

"Oh! Monsieur de Cajare," she said, in a milder tone, "let me beseech you to think what ought to be the results of disappointment, especially when that disappointment itself may have been, in some degree, brought about by the very errors and evils into which you now talk of plunging again. Ought it not, oh, tell me, ought it not to chasten and correct? Ought it not to make you abhor all that is wrong, and seek all that is right? Alas! I can give you nothing like hope if you do indeed love me as you say. I wish that it were otherwise; I wish from my very heart that it were otherwise; but it cannot be. I do pray and entreat that you would urge me no more, for it is quite impossible."

"I must still urge you, Mademoiselle de St. Morin," replied the Baron de Cajare, somewhat sternly; "for many results that you know not of depend upon your answering my love and becoming my wife."

The altered tone in which he spoke was to Annette rather a relief than otherwise; and she replied, "To end all in one word, sir, then, I have but to tell you that, whatever be the case, you never can or will have my hand; nor can you obtain my love, for it is already given to another. Thus, whatever may be the consequences of my reply, that reply is made."

"Let me first tell you what does hang upon your decision, Mademoiselle de St. Morin," said the baron. "First, there depends upon it the life of the Count de Castelneau; next, his honour; next, his property; next, the fame and name of his whole family and relations."

Annette started up from her seat, and gazed on him with a look of wild incredulity.

"It cannot be!" she exclaimed; "oh, no, it cannot be!"

"It is!" answered the baron, firmly and sternly. "I would not urge this plea till every other argument had failed; but I now tell you that it is so; and if you doubt me, ask the count himself."

"I will, I will," cried Annette, wildly; and darting from the room like a bird escaped from the hand which has striven to grasp it, she flew to the cabinet where she had left her guardian. She found him, as we have shown, with his eyes buried in his hands; and although he heard the step which, though still light, was now quick and impatient, he raised not his head; he felt that he dared hardly look that pure innocence in the face.

She paused, and gazed upon him mournfully; she read in that downcast aspect—she remembered in the words that he had spoken to her, and in much that she had seen—dark and terrible signs corroborative of the tale she had just heard. There was a deep mystery, indeed, for her mind in all that she beheld; but if she asked herself what it could be, what was the meaning of all the strange and unaccountable changes which had taken place in the feelings and demeanour of her guardian, it was with no touch of curiosity; it was with the simple, straightforward purpose of judging what it might be her duty to do, and with the resolution to do that duty at any sacrifice.

She paused, then, and gazed upon the count, scarcely trusting her voice to speak. She knew that the tone thereof, that the very first look would betray, in a moment, to the eyes of her guardian, the terror, agitation, and despair which were already in possession of her heart.

The moment of decision was, however, now come; and in that awful moment the high principles and the high soul were not wanting. She called up resolution, she nerved her heart, she determined to dare all boldly, to hear all calmly; and if, by the utmost sacrifice that woman could make, she could save him who had devoted so much of his life to the task of rendering her what she was, she resolved to make that sacrifice, should death itself be the consequence. Ay! death itself: for now she concealed nothing from her own mind; and very often, within the last few months, she had thought, not only that the grave would be preferable to a union with a man whom she did not love, but that the grave must follow very rapidly upon so terrible, so horrible a fate. She now felt most acutely that such anticipations were not fallacious; that death might anticipate such a union, and could not follow far behind. For that she was prepared; for that she was ready; and the only thing which she

miscalculated were her powers of going through calmly the terrible scenes which were to precede that event. She thought that resolution could master everything; and in that belief, after remaining for several minutes in sad and agitated silence, she said, "My dear guardian, my dear father, will you not speak to your Annette?"

The count looked wildly up. "Yes, Annette, yes," he said. "Do not do it, my child! Do not think of it! Reject it at once! Hear not of it!"

"Listen to me, my father," said Annette, "listen to me, I beseech you."

But, while she strove to speak calmly, her voice shook, the hand which she had laid upon his arm trembled violently. "Listen to me, I beseech you, for I am somewhat agitated, somewhat surprised. He tells me—he tells me, that if I refuse to wed him, your life will be the sacrifice."

The count paused for a moment, gazing in her face, and he then answered, solemnly and slowly, "I must not lie, even for you, Annette: he has said true; my life is in his power. Let me tell you, my dear Annette, let me tell you how all this happened. So help me Heaven! I am as guiltless as the child unborn."

"Hush!" she said, "hush, my dear guardian; tell me nothing. With me you want no exculpation; I am satisfied of all. Nothing can shake my faith in you. Have I not known you from my infancy? There be proofs, my father, small, silent proofs, in the daily intercourse of confident hearts, that not the most bitter and condemnatory evidence, and a harsh court of law, can ever outweigh, even by a hair!"

The count started up and clasped her in his arms, exclaiming, "Bless thee, my Annette! bless thee, my sweet child!"

"Oh! do not move me," she said. "I am too weak, too much agitated already. Give me, oh, give me calmness to think and act as I ought. He has your life in his power. Do you think, my guardian, that he will use that power? Do you think that it is quite sure he will attempt to use it?"

"He will, my child," replied the count; "but make me answer no more such questions, my Annette. Since thou hast left me, I have reproached myself bitterly, most bitterly, for subjecting thee to any such painful decision. The moment of feebleness is past. I thank

thee, my child, for thy bright and beautiful generosity towards me ! I thank thee, not only for thy willingness to save me at a sacrifice of more than life, but I thank thee, also, for having given me back myself, and taught me what is right to do. Dearest Annette, thou shalt make no such sacrifice ! Thy fate and fortune, thank God, are already secure : I will meet mine as may best betide me ; but I will not pass my child, the beloved child of my adoption, through the fire, as an offering to such a demon as this who demands thee."

"Nay, nay," said Annette ; "can you suppose that I will suffer such a thing ! Listen to me, my dear father. Seat yourself there, and listen to your Annette, while she pours forth her whole heart towards you. It is but once in her life, perhaps, that she can do so. Nay, let me kneel ;" and, as the count sunk back into the chair, she dropped upon her knees beside him.

"Hear me out," she continued, "hear me out : my conduct is determined fully and resolutely. You know that my heart is already given to another, and not this man, and on that point I will never deceive him ; but if he chooses to demand and receive, as the price of your safety and your peace, this cold and lifeless hand, it shall be his. Of Ernest I must not and I dare not speak. His conduct I must not nor I ought not to blame. He has done his duty, doubtless, to his family and to his station. God provides mitigations for our sufferings even in our griefs ; for had Ernest been as devoted to me as I would have been to him, this moment might have been tenfold more terrible than it now is. Hear me, nay, hear me ; for in this brief moment, when all is to be decided forever, with scarcely the slightest pause for thought, it is necessary that I should consider all things—ay, my father, and prepare you for all things. Much agony may perhaps be spared me ; for neither must I, nor must you suppose, that it is likely I should ever wed this man. Long ere that—if we can so form our plan, that the terrible day may be delayed—long ere that, Annette will be wedded to a sterner lord, but one more calm and true. Nay, fear not, my father : I have no rash thoughts ; but I trust in God, and know that when in yonder room I pledge myself to be his *if I live*, at that instant the fiat goes forth which shall save me from lengthened torture, if it do not relieve me altogether from the obligation of that vow. I know it, I feel it,

and I bless God that it is so ; for, even while he is pleased to afflict me, he gives me the highest and noblest of consolations, the power of showing my love and gratitude towards you. Nay, nay, a few words more ; and I pray you do not weep, for I could weep too, and I would fain resist those tears ; but let us now speak of things more important. My resolution is taken. Now to secure that, it leads to good and not to evil. Let us remember that my hope is in death, not life ; and if I die before the day, this man—this false, base man—may still betray you. We must have sureties, we must have bonds, that this terrible thing is not done for nothing. Oh ! my guardian, I am too inexperienced in such matters to know what will be security enough ; you must judge of that. Come with me, come with me, and fix him firmly to some engagement from which his craft and subtlety cannot escape, otherwise, through life, you will be his slave after Annette is gone. Come with me, for I have not wisdom to deal with things so important ; and, to say truth, I feel faint, and somewhat dizzy with this agitation."

The count rose from the chair in which, during the last few minutes, he had been seated, with his hand shading his eyes. He had evidently been moved by various emotions ; sometimes he had trembled violently, and once the tears had rolled slowly down his cheeks. Latterly, however, he had been very calm, and had made no movement whatsoever.

When his hands were now withdrawn, however, the drops were gone from his eyes, though his face was deadly pale.

"Sit down, my Annette," he replied, in a calm tone ; "rest here till I return. I will settle the whole matter with the Baron de Cajare."

Annette, who felt her strength and courage failing—whose heart, now that all was said and done, that the decision was made, and the energy of action passed away—was sick unto the death ; Annette did as he told her, and the count took two steps towards the door. In that brief moment, however, the truth flashed upon her mind : she started up, sprang forward, and caught him by the arm. "You shall not refuse him !" she cried, "you shall not refuse him ! Did I know that for my sake you suffered, I should die a thousand and a thousand times in one. Oh, no, no ! you shall not refuse him !"

"My child," cried the count, vehemently, "so help me Heaven! as, with my consent, you shall never be his. Death is an empty name: within ten short years that must be my portion, beyond all doubt; and as for the disgrace, none that the hissing lips and pointed finger of popular error could direct at me would be equal for one moment to the shame, the burning shame, that I now feel in having for one instant thought of sacrificing thee to save my worthless existence. Let me go, my child, let me go, to quench this fire that is at my heart."

"Never, never," cried Annette, clinging to him; "never, never, my father: this is my task, this is my duty. Hear me, hear me, oh! I beseech you, hear me. I am willing, I am ready: if you die, I will die with you."

The count unclasped her arms and broke away, but as he did so Annette fell at his feet upon the floor. The count gazed at her for a moment, but she lay there insensible; and he hesitated whether to leave her and fulfil his purpose at once with the baron, or to stay and endeavour to recall her to consciousness. Tenderness, however, for Annette prevailed, and, stooping down, he raised her from the ground. She had become so pale, however, so ghastly was the expression of her countenance, the fainting-fit into which she had fallen was so like death itself, that the count became alarmed, and called aloud for assistance.

Good old Donnine hurried quick at her master's voice; some other servants followed; and the loud lamentations which were now made soon called to the chamber not only the surgeon, but the Baron de Cajare himself. The count, at the moment he entered, was holding Annette in his arms, and the eyes of the two met. But everything like fear had left the countenance of Monsieur de Castelneau, and he exclaimed aloud, "Get you hence, demon, get hence! You see what you have done. Get you hence, and never let me see your face again."

"I fear you must *hear from me* though, Monsieur de Castelneau," said the baron, with a bitter sneer upon his lip; "I fear you must hear from me, and that you shall do right speedily."

"Play what scoundrel part you will, sir," replied the count, "but only rid me of the presence of a villain."

The baron raised his finger with a menacing look, and without more words quitted the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE Baron de Cajare sat in his dressing-room some few hours after the period of his visit to Versailles. He was not by any means so calm and sedate as usual in his demeanour; and the valet who was attending upon him remarked that there was a degree of irritability and impatience in his whole conduct which was very uncommon with him; for to say the truth, and to do him but justice, in his every-day commerce with the world he was of a very tranquil and even temper, receiving the display of violent passions for great occasions alone, and even then guiding them with a sufficient degree of power to prevent them from ruffling his manner, or disturbing his voice and look. Such, however, as I have just said, was not the case at present, and the reason was very plain. There were two passions active in his breast, not one; neither loved to give way, and they irritated him by the struggle between them. These two were the same we have before noticed: two of the most violent, if not the most powerful in the human breast—love and revenge; and they were also the two most strong in his own nature and character, however strange it may seem to say that such a man was capable of love. Still, so perverse a thing is human nature, so strange and so wild are the alliances which take place between different passions in our breast, that his interview with Annette during that morning had increased both his attachment to her and his determination by some means to obtain her. Vanity armed herself in the same cause as love; and pride, unconquerable pride, only bowed the head for the purpose of triumphing more completely.

Towards the Count de Castelneau, however, his feelings were very different. There, unmitigated hatred and the thirst for vengeance were predominant; and sooner or later to work his destruction, and take a terrible account of every sarcastic look and cutting word that the count had directed towards him, was his firmest and strongest resolution; still, how to gratify both these passions was a question of great difficulty, which

troubled him sorely to solve. The desire of revenge, however, was, if anything, the stronger of the two; and he revolved in his mind, with bitter pleasure, the thought of giving up the Count de Castelnau to justice, and of making his sufferings and his shame a means of driving Annette to his own purposes. Perhaps there might even be a dark expectation and desire in the bottom of his heart of obtaining her hand by holding out the hope of saving her guardian's life, and then of punishing her for her coldness by disappointing that hope and leaving him to his fate. Such, there is reason to suppose, were the purposes which he longed to accomplish; and though the complication of feelings from which those purposes arose were most strange, yet it is no less true that hatred, and revenge, and love were all mingled together, and that in his evil heart there existed a passion for Annette de St. Morin which we are forced to call love, combined with the desire of wounding and grieving its object. To accomplish such things, however, it was necessary that he should possess more information than he already had obtained, and that he should win the dark, low scoundrel, from whom he had derived his first intelligence of the assailable point in Count de Castelnau's character, and render him a mere tool in his hands. To do so was most difficult; however, for the desperado was as shrewd and keen as he was unprincipled and base. Bribery, indeed, was the only method to be employed with him; but then no reliance could be placed on him when he was bribed; no one could reckon for an hour that some superior temptation would not lead him to betray any trust reposed in him; and though the Baron de Cajare, to obtain his object, would have made any sacrifice of mere money that could be made—though he would have invited cupidity, and glutted the desires of the ruffian in his service—yet he well knew that the wealth of the Count de Castelnau enabled him to command far greater means; and that, therefore, if Pierre Jean chose to apply to him, and to extort from that nobleman large sums as the price of silence, vengeance and love might both be disappointed. His first object, therefore, was to bind the ruffian to him by such ties as it would be his interest to keep inviolate, and his next, to prevent any actual communication between Pierre Jean and the count. For this double purpose he had already sent for him; and he now sat waiting with

an eager and impatient mind, revolving all his dark schemes, and giving himself alternately to the one and the other of the tempestuous passions which struggled in his bosom.

In the mean while, his valet aided to dress him with scrupulous exactness; for the money which was to be the bribe of his base agent was yet to be obtained, at least in part; and the means which the baron had to employ in order to gain it led him naturally into that society where luxury and ostentation were carried to the highest possible pitch. Before he was completely dressed, Pierre Jean himself appeared; and although the valet was, in his master's opinion, one of those old and tried servants of his will who might be safely trusted with many a delicate secret, yet the baron dismissed him on this occasion, and proceeded with his toilet unaided.

As he went on, he detailed to Pierre Jean all that had occurred at Versailles; but, to his surprise, he found that his companion's view of the progress he had made was very different from his own. Pierre Jean declared that nothing could be more favourable than the result; asked whether he could expect the count and the young lady to yield all at once: and as revenge, for the mere sake of vengeance, without anything to be got by it, was to the eyes of the sharper mere vanity and folly, he could not at all understand why the baron dwelt so much upon the bitter and insulting conduct of the Count de Castelneau.

"Why it seems to me," he replied, to some angry observations of Monsieur de Cajare, "it seems that the old gentleman did as much as could be expected on the first trial. Fear is a thing that one must not make too much of in one's dealings, for, if pushed too hard, it cures itself. A man gets angry and forgets his fear altogether; but it has one great advantage over every other sort of means, for it does not wear out, and may be used again and again every day; each day driving on the matter you aim at a bit more and a bit more, till it is all accomplished. Now you see this morning you pressed the count somewhat too hard, and made the man angry, as well he might be; but just let me go to him to-morrow, and I'll bring the matter round, I'll warrant ye."

This proposal, as we have already shown, did not at

all accord with the baron's views, and he therefore answered, "No, no, my good friend, I have determined upon a different course; I will punish this Count de Castelneau, and marry the young lady too; but if we can arrange our matters properly, before to-morrow at this hour the count shall be in the Châtelet."

"That may suit your views, Monsieur le Baron," replied Pierre Jean, "but I do not see how it would agree with mine. Now the money is to be paid to me, you know, when you marry this pretty Annette; but if you put the count in the Châtelet, you will never marry her at all. As long as this little business of the count's is a secret, we have some influence over him; but the moment that you have made the charge public, you lose your power, for you have done your worst. No, no, my good friend the baron, that's a bad card: don't play it till you have got no better."

"But suppose," replied the baron, "it should be as pleasant to me to punish this Count de Castelneau as to marry Mademoiselle de St. Morin, what say you then?"

"Why, I suppose such a thing is possible," said the man, "though it's very foolish; but, at the same time, that wouldn't make it suit me a bit the better."

"I am not quite so foolish as you think," answered the baron, "as I will show you in a few minutes; and as for your part of the transaction, I can make it suit you just as well; for if I pledge myself to pay you the same sum on the condemnation of the count as I was to pay on my marriage with the lady, the matter will, of course, be equal to you."

"I do not know that exactly," replied the man; "I do not want to hurt the count. The girl was very civil to me when I was bringing her up from Castelneau, and had such a winning way with her that she had almost turned my head, and made me do a very silly thing. So I would rather show her a kindness than an unkindness; and though it is no great kindness, indeed, to marry her to you, yet I suppose she would not be much worse off than most women—poor devils! we lead them hard lives of it, any how. But let me hear your plan farther, my good friend the baron. You spoke just now as if you intended to marry her, after all; now how is that to be brought about? I must see my way clearly, you know."

"Why this, then," said the baron; "I will tell you the general points, Master Pierre Jean; but, having done so, remember, I intend to have the whole management of the matter in my own hands, if you are to have your reward at all. In the first place, I propose to lodge my information against the count with the police to-morrow. You are, on your part, to keep yourself quiet and out of the way till the proper time, and to obey my directions in everything. Having, then, shown the girl that I am in earnest, I will tell her that the count's life depends upon me; that if she will immediately give me her hand, I will set the count free."

"Stay, stay, stay," cried Pierre Jean; "how will you manage that?"

"By suppressing your evidence and sending you out of the country," replied the baron.

"It is a pleasant place, Paris," said Pierre Jean. "I am not fond of travelling, for my own part. I am a domestic man, and fond of my own home, and never like going abroad except upon matters of business."

"I understand you," rejoined the baron, bitterly; "but you do not, of course, suppose that I am such a fool, in dealing with a rascal like you, not to calculate his price to a farthing beforehand."

"You are a wise man, baron," answered Pierre Jean, "and not a fool; but between buyers and sellers, you know, there may be a difference as to the price. Now what do you think I should require for going abroad?"

"I do not know," replied the baron; "but I know what it will suit me exactly to give; and, in order to make no mistake, I have put all the items upon this scrap of paper beforehand, that we may come to the point at once. If I require you to go abroad, you know it will be when my marriage with Mademoiselle de St. Morin is secure; so you will then have, in the first place, your five thousand louis: now what do you demand more?"

"Ten thousand crowns," replied the scoundrel.

"There," said the baron, pointing to a line in a paper which he held in his hand, "you see I have put down that sum beforehand."

"I am delighted to find," answered Pierre Jean, "that you have a just appreciation of my abilities; and now for the other articles, Monsieur le Baron."

"Well, then, at once," replied the baron, "I am ready

to give you the five thousand louis if the count be condemned or if I marry the young lady. Ten thousand crowns in addition if I am obliged to send you from the country, and one hundred crowns each day that the business is going on, from the period of my laying the information till the whole is settled one way or the other; but solely upon condition that you obey my orders to the letter; that you go nowhere but where I permit you to go; and that you give me full and complete information as to all that you know."

"For which I am to have," added Pierre Jean, "the sum of five hundred livres to spend this night in a grand carouse with my friends."

"So be it," said the baron. "Are we agreed?"

"Why, I have one slight objection left," replied Pierre Jean. "That Monsieur Morin—that troublesome Monsieur Morin—gave me notice the other day that I had better not interfere with things that do not concern me; for that there was a noose round my neck which might soon be jerked up. He was speaking of this very affair at the time, and it was that that he aimed at, I am sure."

"Ha!" said the baron, "then we must be on our guard against him. What! you think he warned you not to impeach this man! That might be a severe charge against Monsieur Morin himself."

"Meddle not with him, Monsieur le Baron, meddle not with him," cried Pierre Jean. "No man ever meddled with him yet that did not repent it. There is but one man in all France whom I fear, and he is the man."

"Nevertheless," replied the baron, "we must have that charge of partiality behind our hand, in case he interferes in any way with our proceedings. In the first place, however, you will see my plan already answers well, for I intend to make the charge in my own name, and not in yours, reserving my witnesses till the cause is tried. Should it be necessary to bring you forward at all, the first part of your evidence will show, if I understand you aright, that you have already spoken with this Pierre Morin on the subject, and that he has neglected his duty in not instituting immediate inquiry."

"Why, bless you, my good friend the baron," exclaimed his saucy companion, "Pierre Morin knows the whole business as well as I do. There's nothing takes place in France that he does not know, indeed, and

of that affair, of course, no one knows so much; for it was upon his evidence that two of the men were convicted and executed. He shut them both into a room, and kept them there until the police came. How he happened to let the other one out I cannot tell; but certain it is, that there was a third man with them as they went towards Fiteau's house at the very time and hour the old man was murdered. I cannot doubt that the third man went to the very door with them, for I saw him; and it is not less sure that that third man was the Abbé de Castelneau. The reason of his letting him off is clear enough. Before that time the abbé had adopted his daughter."

"Ay, and that is the reason, too," said the baron, "why he now attempts to screen him from justice! But, if I have my will," he muttered, in a low voice, "the sword of justice shall fall on his own head. I will to the lieutenant himself, and tell the whole story to his private ear. I will go thither directly."

"The lieutenant-general is ill," replied Pierre Jean; "he has been ill for a long while now, and everything passes through this man's hands."

"He is not so ill as to refuse to see me," rejoined the Baron de Cajars: "I will go to him immediately. I would give this right hand to break that Pierre Morin on the same wheel where the Count de Castelneau shall perish."

"You will be too rash, my dear baron, you will be too rash," replied Pierre Jean; "you will ruin us all, if you don't mind, by giving way to your temper. However, do not start up in such a hurry! Remember, you have two little things to do for me before you go. First, to draw up a certain paper embodying all the particulars upon which we have agreed; for all must go on safely, my good friend. I must have all my rewards and recompenses written clearly down; and you may put anything you like into the agreement, on your part, which you may think will bind me up tight. Come, my good friend, it must be done before we part, so it may be as well to do it at once; for, until that paper is signed, I shall consider myself as free to do what I like."

This sort of freedom, however, was not at all that which the baron wished Pierre Jean to enjoy; and, hurried on by the eagerness of passion, he would have consented to anything rather than forego the opportunity

for revenge which seemed now opened before him. He accordingly sat down to draw up the paper, but, notwithstanding his hasty eagerness, it occupied considerable time; for the baron strove hard to avoid entering into particulars, and Pierre Jean would pass nothing whatsoever that was not distinctly specified. The promised reward for every act to be performed was marked with perfect exactness; and it cannot be denied that the passions of the Baron de Cajare, with all his wit and cunning, led him to draw up a document which placed him greatly in the power of the man with whom he was dealing. "And now, Master Pierre Jean," he said, "before I give you these five hundred livres, you will recollect that you are to return to this house before midnight. I will have a room prepared for you, where you can remain with comfort and convenience. There you must continue, well taken care of, during the whole of each day, and never go forth without my permission. If you put your foot over the threshold, you lose your hundred crowns for that day."

Pierre Jean consented without the least hesitation; but it must not be thence inferred that he had any intention whatsoever of keeping one of the promises he made a moment longer than was pleasant and expedient for him to do so. The baron certainly had the strongest tie upon him which he could have, which was that of mercenary interest. By it he thought he could do everything, indeed; but he had yet to learn that there is no bond that is binding upon a man without principle. Suspicion, indeed, which sad experience forces even upon the virtuous and the good after long commerce with the world, is never absent from the wicked and the base; for their own hearts supply the most convincing proof of that treachery and deceit which they guard against in others. Thus, nothing like confidence could ever dwell in the bosom of the Baron de Cajare, and he did, of course, entertain the most lively doubts of the low companion of his iniquity; but he was obliged to content himself by taking the best precautions that he could; and the moment Pierre Jean had received the money and departed, the nobleman called his valet, and ordered him to have the man followed, and all his actions watched. The valet bowed low, in his usual grave and silent manner; but the baron thought that he perceived the slightest possible smile curling his lip, and from that moment he suspected him also.

CHAPTER XX.

"I AM afraid," said the surgeon, as he bent over Annette, "that I must open a vein. This seems to me to be no common fainting fit, but the stunning effect of some terrible agitation. It can do no harm to take a little blood, and must, at all events, relieve the heart."

"Hush!" cried the count, who supported her head upon his arm, "she revives;" and, as he spoke, a sort of faint shudder passed over the fair form that lay pale and deathlike before their eyes.

"Who is that ringing the great bell so furiously?" demanded Monsieur de Castelnau the next moment, speaking in a low voice to one of the servants. "Go to the porter and see; and if that villain, the Baron de Cajaro, be returned on any pretences, drive him forth with blows, and say I made you. My Annette, my sweet Annette! See, she opens her eyes. Be comforted, my beloved child; all will go well."

Annette raised her hand faintly to her head, and looked languidly round for a moment or two, then suddenly fixed her eyes upon the door, and clasped her hands together with an expression in which joy and pain were strangely mingled. At the same instant there was a quick and hurried step in the room, and Ernest de No-gent rushed in and cast himself on his knee beside her.

"My Annette!" he exclaimed, catching her hand, and pressing his lips upon it again and again; "my beloved Annette! they have wounded and grieved you: they have wellnigh killed you; I see it, I see it, my own, my beloved bride. But the grief and the pain are over, my Annette; the agony that we have both suffered is past. I have found my father, as I knew I should find him, eager, anxious that you should be mine. He bids me tell you, dear one, that if he could have chosen from the whole world for his son's happiness, he would have chosen none but you. He bids me say that there is no obstacle, no hesitation, not a shade of doubt. Nay, dear Annette, nay," he continued, "why do you turn towards the count with such a look of agony and grief? What has happened? Surely, surely Monsieur de Castelnau will not object!"

"Far from it, Ernest," replied the count, taking Annette's hand and placing it in his; "she is yours, she is ever yours!"

"Oh no!" exclaimed Annette, in a faint voice, withdrawing her hand. "I promised—I promised but now! Oh Heaven! this is terrible!"

"You promised nothing, my Annette," said the count: "all that is at an end, and forever. I myself have terminated all that, and he is gone."

"But you—but, you!" cried Annette; "but you, my father! what will become of you?"

"Mind not me," replied the count. "What is done is done, Annette. Before this time it is all beyond recall; and were it not, I would make it so even now."

Annette covered her eyes with her hands and wept, while Ernest de Nogent gazed alternately upon her and upon the count with a look of grief, and surprise, and disappointment.

"I had hoped," he said at length, "to have communicated to you, dear Annette, part at least of the joy that I myself felt. It is very, very sad to find that my coming seems to give you more pain than pleasure."

"Oh, say not so, Ernest, say not so," cried Annette, clasping his hand in her own eagerly. "You cannot, cannot tell what it is I feel; you cannot tell how I am circumstanced."

"Will you not give me some explanation, then?" asked Ernest de Nogent.

"I fear I must forbid any such thing at present," said the surgeon, interfering: "it is only too requisite that Mademoiselle de St. Morin should be kept perfectly calm and tranquil for a time."

"Nay, nay," rejoined the count, "nothing will calm her so much as a full explanation with Monsieur de Nogent. Let us but pause for a few moments, till she has recovered some strength. Now, my good friends," he added, speaking to the servants, "now all but Donnine had better leave the room."

His orders were obeyed, and all that the surgeon thought necessary for the purpose of restoring Annette completely was done as speedily as possible. The moments that intervened, indeed, were moments of deep anxiety to all except the Count de Castelnau, whose resolution was by this time taken, and who watched Annette's looks eagerly, till at length her natural colour

returning, though but faintly, to her cheek and lips, he said, "Now, my dear Annette; can you bear this explanation?"

"Oh yes," she answered, "if it may be given, if it ought to be given; it would relieve me more than anything; for Ernest would counsel, and assist, and support us. But think, my father, oh think! can you give that explanation to any one?"

"I can, dear Annette," replied the count; "for it will soon be given by others, if not by me. My mind is made up also; my conduct is determined. I will shake this weight from my heart which has rested so long upon it, which has been my burden through life, and has well-nigh pressed me down into the grave. It is but right, too, my Annette, that he should know all, and the sooner it is told the better. Are you prepared, my beloved child?"

"Oh yes," she said; "nothing can be such anguish as to think that Ernest may doubt or suspect me."

"Doubt or suspect you, dear one?" said Ernest, pressing her hand in his. "Who that knows you could do so for a moment? I see that something terrible has occurred that I do not understand, and the suspense has been very painful to me; but still, my Annette, if there be anything that you would prefer unsaid, let it not be told on my account; nor suppose for one moment that suspicion, or fear, or doubt of any kind will linger in my heart."

Annette extended her hand to him, and looked towards the count with a glance that seemed to ask, "Is he not worthy of my love?"

Every one having left the room except the three persons most interested, the count paused for a moment, looking down fixedly on the floor, and then, raising his head, he detailed to Ernest de Nogent, with his usual calm tone, and clear, perspicuous brevity, the principal points of all that had occurred during the morning. He did not conceal Annette's willingness to devote herself for him; but he connected it at once with her belief that Ernest himself had forsaken her; and he added a few brief but powerful words, displaying the agony of mind which she had suffered, and the certainty she had felt that death would terminate her sufferings before the sacrifice was completed.

Ernest de Nogent listened with painful interest, and

Annette's tears flowed fast at the recapitulation. At length, however, at the allusion made to his silence, Ernest exclaimed, "I have been foolish, very foolish; I ought to have written at once; but I wished to hear to my dear Annette immediately the assurance that my father's willing consent was given." I knew he would give it; I was confident that he would not hesitate for a moment; and therefore it was I set out at once for Castel Nogent without writing, that I might not pain and agitate her by long expectation. But now, Monsieur de Castelneau," he continued, "may I be permitted to know what is the terrible secret possessed by this base man, in order that we may judge how to deal with him?"

The count gazed upon him with a melancholy smile, and replied, "Your appearance and coming hither this day, my young friend, has relieved my mind of part of its load. Whatever befalls me, the happiness of this dear girl will be secure. To you I give her, to you I trust her! It is a precious and a sacred charge; but I know that you will never fail me, and therefore I repose in confidence on you. As for the rest, my conduct was determined before you came, and it is now more firmly fixed than ever. I will tell you what is this secret; for I am resolved, when this villain makes his charge against me, to relate the whole tale simply and truly, and then to abide the consequences, be they what they may. I know my own innocence, though I cannot prove it; and God knows my innocence too, who may better make it appear."

"It is now more than eighteen years ago that the circumstances occurred on which this man will found his charge. I was then, Monsieur de Nogent, in the prime of life; past the first rash epoch of youth, in the full vigour of body and mind, and without one faculty or feeling in the least decayed. According to the usual acceptation of the word, I had been well educated, for I had been instructed in various sciences, I had acquired much knowledge of different kinds, and I was as learned as most men, be their profession what it may; but in the true and real sense of the word I was ill educated, for I had been taught no moral restraint, I had gone through none of the discipline of the heart. I was sent forth, in fact, to educate myself. It was as if arms were put into my hands, and I were bidden to use them without being told how. Cast upon the world early, and holding many

of those rich benefices which are most scandalously given to men who are not, in fact, churchmen, the means of various sorts of gratification were open to me, and life was one great experiment, which I hastened forward to make without experience and without fear. I visited many countries, went through many scenes, and did many acts, on the details of which I need not dwell. I had strong passions, and I indulged them in various ways; but the indulgence was not altogether merely for the sake of vicious gratification; it was rather in pursuit of something higher, better, nobler, which I had not yet found. I was seeking for happiness, in short, but my search was without a guide, though I fancied that philosophy was leading me. I believed that the only real way to discover in what happiness consisted was to taste all enjoyments, to endeavour to separate the ingredients of every pleasant cup, and to take from each the elements which satisfied me most. You may judge yourself what was the result, both upon my character and upon my fortune. At the end of a few years, the first was deeply injured, the second ruined altogether. The effect upon my mind and heart alarmed me more than all the rest. I felt that the state of false and unsatisfactory excitement in which I lived was producing a habit that I could not cast off; a craving for the same stimulating food stronger and stronger every day. I struggled against it; I made efforts to free myself; I proposed to my spirit calmer pleasures, gentler, more virtuous enjoyments. Some of these schemes I even put in practice; and, among the rest, for my earthly blessing and my eternal salvation, I adopted this sweet child, the softener of my heart, the purifier of my mind, the sanctifier of all my feelings to nobler and to holier things. But while God granted me a blessing, he also gave a warning and a punishment. I have said that my fortune was ruined: I was endeavouring to retrieve, to save some small thing out of the wreck of all, to give me the means of educating and providing for the child of my adoption. There was a prospect of success; but ever, when a man is poor, the world presses on him the more hardly, and adversity, like a dog who has hunted down a deer, seizes him by the throat every time he tries to struggle up. My creditors pressed hard upon me; and those to whom I had lent sums of money were rarely found in circumstances to repay them. Among other

claims against me was a debt to a man named Fiteau, a hard, cold-minded old man, who suddenly called for his money, and I was obliged to pay him, though it left me penniless in the world. In that evil hour I encountered in the street two old acquaintances, of no very high or pure character. They were both men of rank, and had once been men of fortune, but were now as poor as myself in purse, and, I may venture to say, much poorer still in principle. One of them, the Count H., owed me a considerable sum, but I was quite hopeless of his ever discharging the debt. He had given me a bond for it; but I knew him to live, as so many other men do live in Paris, solely by the proceeds of the gaming table. I met him, however, and the Chevalier de M., just towards dusk on the evening of a bright April day, and, in the pain and anxiety of the moment, I told them what had just occurred with this Gaultier Fiteau. When I came up, I had remarked something peculiar in the manner of both. They had been talking vehemently and eagerly together, but in low tones, and, as soon as I approached, became silent at once. The count seemed to fancy that what I said regarding Fiteau had for its object to make him pay me the sum he owed me; and he replied, with a peculiar smile that I shall never forget,

"Well, well, my dear abbé, wait till to-morrow, and perhaps I shall be able to discharge the whole."

"Nonsense, count," I answered; "why, you are well-nigh as poor as I am, and, of course, I do not expect any payment."

"Ay, but I expect to receive a large sum," he said.

"From some lucky hit to-night?" I asked.

"Perhaps so," he said, with that same peculiar smile; "but it is a very sure hit too."

"I declare," I replied, "I would try my luck once more myself, but this rascally goldsmith has not left me a louis."

"My two companions spoke a few words to each other in a quick, low voice, and then the count turned to me and said, 'Come with me, my dear abbé, come with me, and I will pay you a part of what I owe you to-night. I am going to old Fiteau's myself to make him give me some money on my diamond snuffbox, and you shall have a part.'"

"A thousand thanks," I answered, "a thousand thanks! It will, indeed, be of great service."

"We then walked on together, and, as we went, my companions more than once spoke to each other apart. The count seemed to propose something, but the chevalier still replied, 'No, no, it would ruin all.' When we had crossed over the bridge and were approaching the old goldsmith's shop, to my surprise the count and his companion turned back, saying that it was not dark enough; but they afterward explained the matter by adding that they did not want to have any one in the shop when they offered the snuffbox. Shortly afterward we returned; and, as we were going down the street in which Fiteau lived, we saw his shopboy, whom I knew well by sight, come out; and the count, saying 'That is he,' crossed immediately to the other side. We now proceeded very slowly up to the door of the shop, which was closed; and the count, muttering 'This is a disagreeable business; I hope there is nobody with him,' paused for a moment as if in hesitation. I laughed at his scruples, and offered to go in and get the money for the box myself; but he said, 'No, no, I will do it, if you will just stay here; and, if you see any one coming, call me immediately, for I should not like to be caught pawning my snuffbox.'

"I replied, 'Very well!' and he then turned to the chevalier, saying, 'Go you in first, and see if there is any one there. Perhaps the old man is gone home himself.' But the door was not locked. The chevalier went in, and I heard him speak to the old goldsmith. The count followed a moment after, the door was closed, and I remained upon watch. I took a turn up the street, which was now dark; and though I thought the conduct of my two companions somewhat strange, not a suspicion of any evil purpose crossed my mind. At that moment I happened to clasp my hands together, thinking of my own situation, and wishing I could get out of Paris. In so doing, my left hand rested upon the seal-ring which I wore upon my right, and which was richly set with diamonds. 'I will sell this,' I thought, as I touched it; 'it is worth fifty louis. I will sell this, and quit Paris at once.' I drew it from my finger with the intention of doing so immediately, for the thing had never struck me before, and I turned towards the door of the shop. As I came near, I suddenly heard a noise of struggling, and then a sound as if some heavy weight had fallen, and then a shrill cry, almost instantly stifled. A horrible

suspicion now, for the first time, crossed my mind. In the agitation of the moment, and with my whole brain reeling, I dropped the ring which I had taken from my finger, but, without seeking it, darted towards the door. At that instant, however, a man rushed forth, and I eagerly asked what had happened, thinking he was one of the two who had just left me, when suddenly, to my horror and astonishment, I saw that he was a stranger, and in the first impulse of the moment I fled at full speed. When I reached my own dwelling, I recollected the ring, but I dared not go back to look for it, and I passed some time in a state of apprehension and suspense that it is impossible to describe. Nothing, however, took place to increase my fears. The trial passed without my name being mentioned. I found that the man whom I had seen come forth from the house where the murder had been committed, and who, by his gallantry and determination, brought the assassins to justice, was the very Pierre Morin, the reputed father of my Annette. But he never mentioned my appearance throughout the whole course of the affair, and the two murderers suffered the horrible sentence of the law without any one having whispered a suspicion against me. On the very day of the execution, however, I received a letter sealed with the very seal I had lost, commanding me, in terms which left no doubt that the writer possessed my secret, to quit Paris without delay; but, at the same time, that very letter enclosed the means requisite for obeying the injunction. More than once since I have received a letter so sealed, and in every instance except the last I have obeyed to the letter the directions given me. On the last occasion, those directions implied that I was to say to the Duke of Choiseul words which I thought might deceive him concerning the birth of my dear Annette. I determined not to utter them; and it is clear that, in consequence of my acting, as I thought, justly and rightly, this Pierre Morin, who is now, I find, chief commissary, has given over the secret to the Baron de Cajare."

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed both Annette and Ernest de Nogent at the same moment, "it cannot be; he would never do that."

"Ay!" said the count, "how can you judge, my dear Annette! What can you know of this Pierre Morin! Ay, now I remember," he continued, "the gentleman

you saw in the wood! but still no one else could have done it, my dear child; for no one could give such information but himself."

"We cannot tell that, Monsieur de Castelneau," said Ernest de Nogent; "but sure I am it is not Pierre Morin: I know him well; and, although he is generally held to be strict and severe in his dealings with the villainous crew of this metropolis, I have always found him generous and kind, and one who weighs a man's motives as well as his actions. However, the conduct of this Baron de Cajare is base and shameful; and if it can be shown that he has used such threats for such purposes, it will go far to destroy any charge that he may bring. He cannot long have left you, Monsieur de Castelneau!"

"Scarcely an hour," replied the count, pointing to a clock on the mantelpiece.

"Well, then," continued Ernest de Nogent, "I will hasten after him with all speed; and, seeing the commissary of police myself, I will endeavour to discover what share he has had in this business."

The count shook his head. "Alas! my young friend," he replied, "I fear your experience is not sufficient to render you a match for the shrewd and veteran director of the Parisian police."

"Perhaps I may not be able to discover all," replied Ernest, "but I may discover something; and, at all events, I shall weaken this bad man's testimony, by charging him directly with having threatened you with such an accusation, for the purpose of driving you, against your inclination and hers, to give him the hand of my dear Annette. My horses are fresh; I shall reach Paris almost as soon as himself. Were it not better," he added, addressing the count in a low tone, "were it not better for you, my dear sir, to order your carriage at once, and put the frontier between you and Paris ere daybreak to-morrow? The accusation is false, but the result of such things is always uncertain. Justice does not always in France, alas! hold the scales very even. You have no protection at the court now, Monsieur de Castelneau. Were it not better, I say, to be absent—to be beyond the reach of enemies?"

"No," answered the count, "no. As I have said, my young friend, my determination is taken. It is too late to-day to set out for Paris, but early to-morrow I will

myself go to the lieutenant-general of police. I will tell him of the threat which this trader in human hopes and fears has used against me, and, relating the whole facts as I have now told them to you, I will show him that I am ready to answer the charge whenever it is brought before him. Thus there can be no use of your going to Paris this night. Stay here with us, Ernest, and pass this evening at least in one of those happy dreams whereof this stormy life has but few; stay to console and comfort Annette, for she has needed consolation this many a day, and has not found it."

Ernest de Nogent gazed fondly at Annette for a moment, and pressed her hand in his; but he answered, "The best consolation I can give her is in aiding you; nor, indeed, could our dream be a happy one under such circumstances as now surround us. Dear Annette, I ought to go to Paris; I ought to go immediately, without hesitation or delay. I am concerned as well as the count, for this man has striven to rob me of love and happiness for life. I must go, I ought to go."

He rose as he spoke, but Annette rose also; and, laying her hand upon his arm, detained him for a moment.

"Ernest," she said, in a sad tone, "there are some things on which, I am told, men consider themselves privileged to deceive women—the most honourable and honest men, Ernest. You are going to fight this man: is it not so?"

"No, I can assure you, dear Annette," he replied, "whatever may be eventually the result, such is not my purpose at present."

"Promise me, then, promise me," said Annette, "that you will avoid a quarrel with him—that you will not draw your sword upon him."

"Not so, dearest Annette," replied Ernest de Nogent, firmly. "Believe me when I tell you, as straightforwardly and truly as you yourself could speak, that I go not with the slightest intention of seeking any quarrel with this Baron de Cajare; that I will rather shun it if possible. Of this I assure you, my dear Annette; and I am sure that, after having said thus much, you will not seek to bind me by any such promise as you have just asked. Rash promises have but too often sealed a man's sword to the scabbard when honour should have made him draw it, and have brought down

imputations upon him which have cost him the sacrifice of life itself to wipe away. I will seek no quarrel with him, Annette; and pray, my beloved one, be satisfied with that assurance."

"I will," said Annette, "I will; for I do not think, Ernest, that, however rashly you might hazard life in moments of joy and bright happiness, you would willingly leave me forever alone in a time of such misery and danger as this."

Ernest de Nogent cast his arms round her and kissed her cheek, and the Count de Castelnau turned away, and walked with a slow step towards the window. He instantly returned, however, and, taking Ernest's hand in his, he said, "I thank God most sincerely, that, whatever may happen to me, she has such a one to protect her; and now farewell: act well and wisely; for wisdom and truth together will win the day against all odds."

CHAPTER XXI.

PIERRE MORIN sat alone in his own house, but the fate of ambition had been his; though, to say truth, he as little deserved that fate from any ambitious feeling in his own mind as any man that ever lived. Greatness, however, had been thrust upon him; and, as I have said, the fate of ambition had been his. Domestic life was gone; it was no longer by his own fireside he sat: it was in a small office, with the word "*Etude*" marked upon the outer door, with two other entrances on either side, a bell upon the table before him, and innumerable reams of written papers piled up in shelves around, ticketed and marked within view, but closely secured by wirework screens, of which no one had the key but himself. Here he sat, then, reading attentively, by the light of a lamp, a long report, written in very close characters, while ever and anon he laid it down and seemed to think over the contents, and then again took up the paper, and went on with the same attention as before. When he had done he marked a small note of the contents on the outer leaf, put it aside, and turned to a list of memoranda; after looking through which he rang his bell, and a clerk appeared after knocking at the door.

"Has the person I told you of been here?" demanded Pierre Morin.

"Yes, sir, and left this paper," replied the man.

Pierre Morin took it, and examined the contents attentively, making a sign at the same time for the clerk to remain in the room.

"Ha!" he said, "ha! He has, has he? Well, we will see! Send for an exempt—any one will do—and three archers; and let an exempt and the same number of archers be here at ten o'clock. See who that is ringing the bell."

The clerk went out into the office beyond, and thence into a little vestibule which communicated with the street by a door well secured. There was a small grated wicket in the door, as in the doors of prisons, through which any one within could hold whatsoever communication he wished with those without, and yet be able to put a stop to the conversation whenever he pleased by closing a wooden shutter over the grating.

Through this wicket the clerk now spoke for a moment to a man in the street, and then returned to tell Pierre Morin that the ringer of the bell was a person calling himself Monsieur de Nogent, who wished to speak with him on business of the utmost importance.

"I know his face, sir," continued the clerk; "he was one of the king's pages of honour a good many years ago, and has since been on service in Flanders and on the Rhine."

"Let him in," said Pierre Morin, "but admit no one else, for I have much fresh business on hand to-night."

The clerk retired, and a minute or two after Ernest de Nogent entered the room.

"Good-evening, Monsieur de Nogent," said Pierre Morin. "Pray take a seat for a moment or two. I have very little time to speak with any one to-night, a load of fresh business having been cast upon me unexpectedly."

"I should have been here an hour ago," replied Ernest, "had not one of my horses fallen. But the cause of my coming, Monsieur Morin, is of deep importance to me and others, and of some consequence to yourself, perhaps."

"Oh, yes," answered Pierre Morin; "I know all about it, Monsieur de Nogent, though once in my life something has taken place which I did not know that

is, your arrival in Paris. However, I am aware of the affair that brings you here, and it is all in proper train."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Ernest de Nogent. "I think you must be mistaken."

"Oh, no," answered Pierre Morin: "the business is, that our good friend the Baron de Cajare has been threatening the Count de Castelneau with charges of a very serious nature, if he do not choose to give him the hand of Mademoiselle de St. Morin."

Ernest de Nogent looked astonished, and, after a momentary pause, demanded, "Then have you really been the person to furnish this information to the Baron de Cajare? I offered to pledge my life that you had not."

"You did quite right," replied Pierre Morin. "I gave him no information at all: nay, more, within the last three hours he has gone and charged me to the lieutenant-general with conniving at Monsieur de Castelneau's escape from justice. Is it possible that there can be such a fool as the Baron de Cajare?"

"It does appear to me that he is less foolish than malicious," replied Ernest: "if he thought you would say anything in favour of the count, it was, of course, his best plan to charge you as an accomplice."

"It is really curious," said Pierre Morin, with a smile, "to see how simple you men of the world can be. Why, did the fool think that the lieutenant-general would bring discredit on the whole office by listening to the tale of a notorious swindler and *intrigant* like himself, against one of the oldest and most tried servants of the police? Why, he would not sacrifice the lowest *mouchard*, that, dressed up as a waiter, listens to the conversation in a low coffee-house, to the enmity of such a villain as this Cajare. Besides, what could the fool expect, when he roused a man full of gout, and rheumatism, and gravel, and Heaven knows what besides, from a nice little supper in his own bedroom, to come and listen to an unpleasant charge against a person without whose assistance he could not keep up his office for an hour? Why, of course, that the good lieutenant would send the whole tidings to me, and bid me deal with the matter as I might think fit."

Ernest de Nogent had smiled at the commissary's method of reasoning, and, from the tone in which he spoke, concluded that all would go right for the Count de Castelneau; but Pierre Morin, who was a great deci-

pherer of the transient expressions of men's countenances, read in a minute what was passing in the young gentleman's mind, and hastened to undeceive him.

"Notwithstanding all this, Monsieur de Nogent," he said, "I must not lead you into a belief that the situation of the Count de Castelneau is not a very dangerous one. Here is a grave charge made against him; a charge in regard to which my evidence must be demanded, and not only must I speak the truth, but I have spoken the truth nearly twenty years ago."

"If so," said Ernest de Nogent, "how happens it that the case was not investigated at the time?"

"It is all according to the routine of the office," replied Pierre Morin. "As soon as I was sworn in to the duties of the station then conferred upon me, I informed the lieutenant-general of those days of certain facts concerning Monsieur de Castelneau, which, perhaps, he may not have communicated to you."

"He has told me all," said Ernest de Nogent; "all, I am quite sure, without the slightest disguise."

"Well, then," said Pierre Morin, who, notwithstanding this assurance, did not choose to speak more plainly, "you know what I allude to. I made the communication of all I had seen and heard to the lieutenant-general himself. He took a note of it, which still exists; but nothing farther was done, our ordinary rule being never to proceed against any person whose guilt is not clear. If we think that this individual or that is going on in a course dangerous to government or to society, we may arrest him, and keep him quiet for a time; but we never proceed to the scandal of public trials and examinations till we are quite sure that a man has committed a crime; unless, indeed, some impertinent fool like this Baron de Cajare, either from private enmity or mere intrusive folly, forces the matter upon us by a public charge. Such was the case of Monsieur de Castelneau. We could not prove that he was guilty at that time; it was my own private opinion that he was not, and such is still my belief. The lieutenant-general left me to keep my eye upon him, and if I found that there was fresh cause for suspicion, to act as the case might require. Still, I must tell you, the affair is very dangerous for him at present. Here is a new witness come forward in the business, who is not only a villain, but a very cunning villain, and what he may say no one can tell. Neither the king nor

his ministers are at all well disposed to Monsieur de Castelneau, and the turn which these things may take can never be ascertained beforehand. Now tell me, Monsieur de Nogent, what does he intend to do? I give you my promise that, if you tell me sincerely, I will not use the information against him in any way."

"He intends," replied Ernest de Nogent, "he intends to come to Paris to-morrow morning, to inform the lieutenant-general of the threats which have been used against him, to give every explanation, and to submit himself to whatever may be judged necessary by the police."

"That looks like innocence," said Pierre Morin, after a moment's thought.

"Oh! can you doubt for a moment that he is innocent?" exclaimed Ernest de Nogent. "After a long life of beneficence, kindness, and honour, can you doubt that he is unstained by such guilt?"

"I do not doubt it myself," replied Pierre Morin; and as he pronounced those words, and marked the enthusiastic eagerness of his young companion, a smile came upon his lips: the grave and melancholy smile of sad experience, when brought in sudden contact with the freshness of youthful confidence. "I do not doubt it myself," he repeated, "but there may be others who will doubt, and it is that which made me glad he should take a course which looks like innocence; for in this good world it is very often better to look innocent even than to be innocent, whatever it may be in the next. Let him come, but yet with no unseemly haste, as if he feared: I will take care that he shall not be sent for before he appears, so that it may be a voluntary act; that is to say, if I am assured that he will present himself."

"Of that you may be quite certain," answered Ernest de Nogent; "but can nothing farther be done to discover how this Baron de Cajare intends to proceed, and to take the sting out of his malice? Oh that it might rest upon me alone to do so! but sooner or later it may come to that, for I have many a long arrear to settle with him already."

"Hush, hush!" cried Pierre Morin, laughing, "you must not speak of such violent proceedings here, in presence of the police, or I must send for an exempt. But leave the Baron de Cajare to me; depend upon it, I shall prove a more terrible combatant to him than your,

self. I rather suspect, Monsieur de Nogent, that if you will have the kindness to wait till I have settled my accounts with him, and after that wish to arrange his affairs with you likewise, you will have to seek him either in the colonies, or else in the galleys at Toulon. The man is a fool, sir, the man is a fool; not simply for offending the chief commissary of police—for that many an honest man has done, and been none the worse for it—but for offending the person who has the chief power of punishing rogues, when he knows himself, as well as I know him, to be one of them: there is the folly, Monsieur de Nogent. I have a great mind, however," he added, "to let him go on a little while longer; for there is something I would fain find out, which, perhaps, I may not be able to lay hold of unless I let him discover it himself, and yet I think it may be done, too; but I must consider of the matter, and speak, in the first place, with the lieutenant-general of police. It is time that I should go thither, however," he said, looking at his watch, "for we have just three quarters of an hour before his bedtime. It may be as well if you go with me too, for this business has annoyed my worthy superior, and it will be better to sooth him and send him to bed quiet, that he may rise in good-humour to-morrow. I will soon tranquillize him, and you can then return to Versailles, if you think fit. All you will say to the lieutenant-general is to confirm my words in regard to the intention of the count to present himself willingly to-morrow, and you will inquire what hour will be most agreeable for the interview."

Ernest de Nogent willingly agreed to accompany Pierre Morin, and the commissary accordingly took his hat and sword, and led the way through the office where the clerk was seated into the little vestibule beyond. In that chamber were now standing four men in military habits, to one of whom Pierre Morin spoke a few words as he passed out, and the archers—for such they were—followed him at once into the street. The commissary, however, took no farther notice, but went on; and the archers, with the exempt at their head, pursued a different course. A short walk brought the chief commissary and his young companion to the hotel of the lieutenant-general of the police, where the appearance of Pierre Morin immediately procured admission; and in a few minutes they were introduced into the dressing-room of

that powerful officer, who was, perhaps, more feared for fifty miles round the capital than even the king himself. He was at this time not very far advanced in life, but appeared, as Pierre Morin had said, to be eaten up with gout and various diseases. His countenance was anything but pleasing, though probably it had once been handsome; but the irritation produced by wearing sickness was evident in every line, and his first salutation, even to Pierre Morin, was, "Psha! why did you not come sooner, Monsieur Morin! and who have you brought with you here?"

"I could not come earlier, monseigneur," replied Pierre Morin, "because I wished to obtain such satisfactory information, in the first place, as would set your mind perfectly at ease. In regard to myself, monseigneur, I take it for granted that you are satisfied; at all events, if to-morrow you will look in the volume and at the folio I mentioned, you will find my full deposition regarding this business twenty years ago."

"I am satisfied, I am satisfied," said the lieutenant-general, peevishly. "I sent for the volume, and saw the whole thing. I leave it all to you to arrange."

"Nay, monseigneur," said Pierre Morin, "it will be necessary for you, I am afraid, to go into the business yourself to-morrow morning, as I must give evidence, and cannot both bear witness and conduct the inquiry. It will not, however, take half an hour, for everything shall be prepared by me beforehand; and I think you will find, in five minutes, that this charge has been arranged by two swindlers, the chief of whom is the Baron de Cajare, for the purpose of frightening Monsieur de Castelneau, and extorting something from him. At all events, it will be satisfactorily shown to you, whatever may be your judgment in regard to Monsieur de Castelneau himself, that this Baron de Cajare is little better than a common cheat; and his chief witness, if I divine rightly who he is to be, I propose to hang as speedily as possible, if you have no objection; unless, indeed, he does something to merit a little longer license."

"Oh, I have no objection," replied the lieutenant-general; "do as you please, Morin, only be certain of what you are about, you know."

"Oh, I am quite sure, sir," replied Pierre Morin: "we shall have him to-night; can hear what he has to say upon this business to-morrow; he may be interrogated."

upon any of his own affairs—there are six or seven of them—on the day after; his trial can come on upon Saturday, and Tuesday will be a very good day for hanging him, if you have no objection.”

“None in the world,” replied the lieutenant-general. “Any day you like; it is quite the same to me. But who is this gentleman, Morin?”

“Oh, I beg your pardon, and his also, sir,” replied the commissary; “this is Monsieur de Nogent, formerly page of honour to the king.” The lieutenant-general rose up in his seat and made a low bow to Ernest de Nogent, while Pierre Morin continued, “He has come to wait upon you regarding this business of Monsieur de Castelneau, who sent him immediately to give information of the threat used towards him by the Baron de Cajare, and to inquire at what hour you will be willing to give him audience, that he may meet any charges boldly and at once.”

“That is favourable,” replied the lieutenant-general, “that is very favourable. As to the hour: what time do you think everything will be ready, Monsieur Morin?”

Pierre Morin approached somewhat closer to the lieutenant-general of police, and said, in a low voice, “You had better name any time you like, sir: your health must be cared for before all things; and you should be guarded against the rawness of the morning air. Perhaps the hour of noon might suit you? I will be responsible that no escape shall take place, though I am sure such a thing is not intended.”

“No, not noon, not noon,” replied the lieutenant-general; “that is too late. I am always up by ten, and can be down at the bureau by eleven. No, no; we must do our duty, Monsieur Morin, we must do our duty. Let us say eleven o’clock, if you please.”

“The count will be quite ready to wait upon you then, sir,” said Ernest de Nogent. “He is prepared and willing to give every explanation of the only circumstance on which any charge can be founded against him, knowing that such a charge must be false, and that, the more it is investigated, the more clearly will his innocence appear.”

“I doubt it not at all, sir, I doubt it not at all,” said the lieutenant-general; “for this same man who has accused him has had the impudence to charge our faithful and excellent friend here, Monsieur Morin, with

conniving at the crime, when the registers of the police show, on the contrary, that he made his declaration of all the circumstances affecting Monsieur de Castelneau between eighteen and nineteen years ago. Thus one part of the charge is evidently false, and a malicious motive is very clear."

Ernest de Nogent bowed his head, replying, "I doubt not, sir, that to-morrow still stronger motives will be displayed; and I am sure that so wise and experienced a magistrate as yourself will take the character of the accuser and the accused into consideration."

"Assuredly, assuredly," replied the lieutenant-general. "Good-night, Monsieur de Nogent; good-night, Monsieur Morin: my hour is come for going to bed, and I must have a calm and quiet night, that I may wake with a clear mind to-morrow."

Pierre Morin and his young companion took their leave and withdrew; but the commissary of the police made no comment upon the interview which had just passed, merely saying, "I will see you on your way, Monsieur de Nogent: where do your horses stand?"

Ernest de Nogent told him; and they proceeded with a quick pace through various streets, lanes, and passages, with all the intricacies of which few persons in Paris, except Pierre Morin, were thoroughly acquainted, and which not many could have traversed with safety. He walked on, however, with a calm step, a thoughtful countenance, and eyes fixed upon the ground, without saying a word to his companion, and only raising his face every now and then, as if instinctively, at particular spots, where his glance was sure to meet with some other person, apparently quite idle, whom the commissary sometimes saluted with a nod, sometimes with a "Good-night," and sometimes with the question of "Anything new?"

The answers were generally as brief; and, after passing through a number of narrow streets and turnings, the two gentlemen entered the Rue Tirechapes, which, at the moment, was apparently quite vacant. Here Pierre Morin looked around him, but nothing was to be seen except a light streaming from one or two of the upper windows, where, far above the street—which was at that time the Monmouth-street of Paris—were innumerable receptacles of every sort of vice, known under the familiar name of *tripots*. At the corner of a cross street,

where there was a greater blaze than ordinary pouring forth from the high casements, and shining on the houses opposite, Ernest de Nogent observed a party of three or four men, apparently in a very gay mood, issuing out from a doorway, and pause to laugh and blaspheme a moment or two before they went on.

At that very instant, however, about an equal number of men darted across from a house of the same kind on the opposite side of the way, rushed into the midst of the group, and seized one of the most prominent talkers by the throat. The words "*De par le roi*" were just heard, and the rest of the merry party scattered in every direction, making the best use of their legs out of the way of the police. The man, either hot with wine or courageous from despair, made a momentary effort to cast off his captors; but he was overpowered in an instant, and struggled no longer.

Ernest de Nogent had paused; but Pierre Morin walked on without even stopping to look, and only noticed the proceeding by saying to one of them as he passed, "To my house!" He then led the way forward as before, saying, "That is one bird springed. I must take another to-night, but perhaps I may have to see to that myself. This is but inferior game. Now, Monsieur de Nogent, I will wish you good-by; for there, before you, is the place where your horses stand, and we must be both about our business. I shall see you, I suppose, to-morrow with Monsieur Castelneau!"

"If I may be permitted to come," said Ernest de Nogent.

"Oh yes, come—come by all means," replied Pierre Morin. "Good-night, good-night;" and he turned away.

CHAPTER XXII.

We must now change the scene from the dark, gloomy, and narrow Rue Tirechapes; and, although the transition may dazzle his eyes, must bring the reader to one of the gayest and most brilliant saloons in the capital city of France. Everything was gold, and glitter, and ostentation; lights innumerable appeared in every part

of the three rooms ; looking-glasses of large size and the finest polish reflected the blaze ; and it was difficult to say which was the most splendid, the clothing of the walls, or that of the personages assembled within them. The company consisted entirely of men, indeed ; but the fashion of that day permitted every sort of gaudy colour and shining decoration in male habiliments, and certainly none had been spared on the present occasion. The suite of rooms was so divided that one was appropriated to cards alone, and in it were no less than five tables, each of which was surrounded by players. Another room had a faro-table and a hazard-table, and at the latter were seated several of the most courtly and libertine of the French gamblers. They were not, indeed, of that class of professional sharpers who make their living entirely by the cards or by dice, but they were those with whom gambling was both a passion and a mode, and who were perhaps sometimes the dupes and sometimes the cheats, as the various circumstances in which they were placed required. At the hazard-table, engaged with the Count de Melun, the master of the house, and betting with several of those around, sat the Baron de Cajare. He had a large pile of gold by his side, and nothing could appear more graceful, free, and open than his demeanour, while sometimes he jeasted upon his own luck, sometimes observed that this was to compensate for the long run of evil fortune which had befallen him previously.

"Very handsome compensation indeed," said the Count de Melun ; "why, what between the gold you have there, and the notes you have got, you must have won a hundred thousand livres."

The Baron de Cajare looked at a card by his side, and replied with a tone of quiet triumph, "A hundred and fifty-five thousand livres, my good friend."

"Well, one more throw," replied the count, in a somewhat angry tone ; "and if I lose that I shall give it up."

He threw accordingly, but the dice were as much against him in his own hand as they were in that of the Baron de Cajare.

"Come, St. Paul," he said, "sit you down and try your luck with him. You have won one bet from him to-night, and perhaps may have a better chance. I am sick of it, and will go and try my hand at piquet."

Thus saying, he walked away, and his friend, sitting down at the table with the baron, actually did win from him two or three thousand livres. In the mean time, the Count de Melun passed into the neighbouring card-room, and looked for a moment at some of the piquet-tables; but, finding that there was no place for him, and, to say the truth, somewhat out of spirits with the course of his fortune during the evening, he walked on into a third chamber, which was quite empty, and took up a glass of sherbet from a table covered with refreshments. An instant after a servant entered, and put a very small note into his hand, which the count opened carelessly, but read attentively, and apparently with some surprise. He then raised his eyes, and saw the attendant who had given it standing at the door waiting for an answer. Advancing with a quiet step towards him, the count said in a whisper, "Are they below?"

"Yes, sir," said the man; "there are four of them."

"Then bring them up," replied the count, "by the back stairs into that cabinet. Keep the door in the smallest degree ajar, and let them come when I call."

The man withdrew instantly, and the count re-read the note attentively. Then folding it up and placing it under one of the dishes on the table, he sauntered quietly into the card-room again, and leaned against the mantelpiece, where he could see through the open doors all that passed at the hazard-table in the third chamber.

"Now will you take my place, Melun?" said one of the piquet players.

"No, I thank you," replied the count; "I am out of luck to-night, but I shall go back presently and have another throw with Cajare." Thus saying, he continued gazing into the other room towards the table where the baron and St. Paul were still playing at hazard. Sometimes, indeed, he turned away and stared, it seemed listlessly, into one of the large looking-glasses behind him. Still, however, if in averting his head he sought to escape the sight of the growing wealth of the Baron de Cajare, whose fortune had only wavered for a moment to return with brighter smiles than ever, the Count de Melun was not successful, for the looking-glass presented just the same scene as he beheld when he turned the other way, and in it were seen the back of the baron, with a pile of gold and notes increasing every moment,

and the face of Monsieur de St. Paul expressive of no great satisfaction in his game. After this state of things had continued for about a quarter of an hour, the Count de Melun sauntered slowly up to the hazard-table, and placed himself by the side of Monsieur de St. Paul.

"I wonder if my luck is changed by this time," he said. "I should think it is; for in four trials I have drawn three long threads out of the tablecloth, and only one short one."

Now let not the reader be surprised at either of the two extraordinary points which this speech presents for consideration. It is certainly very wonderful that men of sense and education should argue upon such grounds as the drawing threads out of a tablecloth, and draw auguries from such irrelevant things where their fortunes and greatest worldly interests are concerned; but it is nevertheless true that they do so daily, whenever they are under the influence of the temporary insanity called gaming. In the next place, let not the reader be surprised that the Count de Melun said that he had done a thing which he had not done, although, as we have related his whole proceedings, it must be very evident that he had drawn no threads out of the tablecloth at all. It was a falsehood, it is true, which an honest man would not have spoken; but the count was not one of those scrupulously honest men who hesitate to tell what is called a white lie even when it suits their purpose, and on this occasion he certainly had an object.

"Well, Melun," said Monsieur de St. Paul, taking the hint, "try your luck now. I have had throws enough for the present."

The count acceded, and, passing round to that side of the table, whispered a word to St. Paul, and took his seat and the dice.

As upon a former change of opponents, the baron again lost for a minute or two, but his success returned as speedily as before; and he was in the highest career of fortune, and shaking the dice-box gayly above his head, when the Count de Melun suddenly started up, overthrew the table with all its riches upon the ground, and caught the hand and arm of the baron tightly in his own grasp before he could bring the box down again.

"Now, Cajare," he exclaimed, at the same moment, "you shall cut my throat if you have not dice up your sleeve."

He was a stronger man than the baron, but Monsieur Cajare struggled free from his grasp. As he did so, however, the very effort produced the proof against him. Two dice dropped from the box in his hand, and two more from his sleeve; and furious rather than confounded, he instantly drew his sword upon his adversary. The Count de Melun was not slow to meet him in the same manner; but, before two or three passes had been exchanged, the weapons of both were beaten up, and two strong hands were laid upon the collar of the Baron de Cajare.

"Is this like gentlemen?" cried the baron, fiercely, turning round to see who it was that interfered; but the moment he did so his eyes fell upon two archers of the Châtelet, with an exempt and another archer standing close beside them.

"Pray, for what am I arrested?" he exclaimed, endeavouring to keep up the show of daring effrontery which he had assumed. "What is the charge against me?"

"The being a common cheat and swindler," said the exempt, coming forward; "the playing with Italian dice, and plundering at the gaming-table."

"Of which here is proof sufficient," exclaimed Monsieur de St. Paul, who had caught up the dice from the floor; "and doubtless this has been going on very long."

"No, sir," replied the exempt, "not very long: there are many other charges against the baron, but this particular practice of his has only lately begun. Take him away!" and Monsieur de Cajare was accordingly removed from the room.

As soon as he was in the vestibule below, he turned with a bitter expression upon his lip to the exempt, and said, "I suppose I am to be taken before Monsieur Morin. This is, of course, his handiwork?"

"Oh no, my dear sir," replied the exempt, who was somewhat of a wag; "we have a nice little lodging for you in the Châtelet already prepared; and as I believe you have some business at the police-office to-morrow, it will be all convenient."

The baron bent down his head with that conviction coming upon him which seizes upon most bad men towards the end of their career, that honesty, after all, is the best policy; and that in the very cunningest schemes

of knavery there is still some mortal ingredient which ultimately proves fatal to their success. A *fiacre* stood ready at the door, and into it he was now placed, with the exempt and two archers, while the third jumped upon the coach-box with the driver, and the vehicle rolled rapidly to the gates of the Châtelet.

The baron found everything ready for his reception; a tolerable room was allotted to him, better, indeed, than most of those that the building contained; but still it was a horrible and a sickening abode. The sallow walls seemed themselves a picture and a memento of the sickly looks of those who, sprawling their names upon them, had recorded for future tenants the period of their own sojourn in that place of guilt and misery. The air of the room smelt faint and confined; and the window, far up near the ceiling, showed the massy bars cankered with rust, but still too strong for human efforts. A table and a chair, and a bed of loathsome aspect, were the only furniture afforded to the proud and the luxurious; to him who had grown hard-hearted in prosperity, and who had built up vice and wickedness upon pampered success and untamed indulgence. The baron gazed upon it, and felt as if his heart would have burst at that moment; but his was a heart that might be smitten without being humbled, punished without being chastened; and the first effort was to shake off the oppression of circumstances, and to struggle rather than repent.

He walked quickly up and down the room as soon as he was left alone, seeking courage and powers of endurance from any source, and finding it only in the fiend Pride, who counselled him still to resist, even when resistance was vain. But thought was torture to him, and reflection added horror to horror; for he had to remember that he was now not alone frustrated, but he was detected and disgraced; that his guilt was clearly proved against him; that he could no longer pretend to honour and to innocence; that reputation and character, as well as wealth and station, were gone; that he must lose his rank as a soldier, as well as his character as a gentleman; that he had no resource but the society and the habits of low sharpers and impostors. Suddenly the names upon the walls struck his eyes, and lifting the pitiful lamp, which afforded the only light allowed to him, he read three or four which seemed to be the freshest. They were those of persons whose trials he well

remembered : the first had been broken on the wheel ; the two next had been hanged some three months before ; the fourth had been sent to the galleys, and in a spirit of miserable mirth, which the baron had not yet learned to feel, had written under his name, in anticipation of his coming fate, "*Vogue la galère.*"

CHAPTER XXIII.

As the hour of eleven struck from the clock of Notre Dame, the carriage of the Count de Castelneau, drawn by six horses, and accompanied by two or three servants, drew up at the principal door of the bureau of police. Everything about the equipage was plain, but everything was rich ; and the aspect of the count himself, though still dressed in the black habiliments which he had never laid aside, was that of a nobleman of high rank and wealth. Nobody could doubt or mistake it ; and, as he alighted from the vehicle, and walked with his usual calm, slow, firm step into the building, the officers of the police themselves, though none knew better the emptiness of fortune than they did, or were more accustomed to see high birth in humiliating situations, were impressed with the air and aspect of the man, and led him forward with reverence to the private room of the lieutenant-general. That officer had seen the count's arrival from his window ; and, having a great opinion of wealth and station, shared fully in the feelings of his inferiors, and received the count at the door of the room with all tokens of deference and respect. He watched the countenance of Monsieur de Castelneau, it is true, with that habit of scrutiny which had been engendered by years of dealing with the cunning and the wicked, but he perceived no trace of agitation : all was calm ; though grave, not downcast ; though serious, not sad.

The count was followed into the room by Ernest de Nogent, who certainly was the most agitated of the two. Him also the lieutenant-general welcomed with much courtesy and affability ; and he begged both to be seated, while he himself took his place near them, leav-

ing room at the table in the middle of the chamber, at which there was but one chair, for a secretary to write, should his assistance be required. There was no fourth person present, however; and the Count de Castelneau began the conversation at once, as soon as the first ceremonies were over.

"I have ventured to intrude on you, sir," he said, "although I had heard that your health, unhappily for the country, has suffered from the duties of your arduous office, to inform you that a person named the Baron de Cajare yesterday used threats towards me which no French gentleman can endure, and which I am sure the police of the realm will not tolerate, unless it should be found that the crimes with which he hinted he would charge me are satisfactorily proved. In order, sir, to afford you the opportunity of at once deciding whether his accusations are just or not, I come to give you my own plain, straightforward account of those events on which it seems he intends to found his accusations, and that you may compare my statement with such other information as you possess upon the subject, and thence draw your own conclusions."

"Very proper and honourable conduct indeed, sir," replied the lieutenant-general. "May I ask what was the particular crime with which the baron threatened to charge you?"

Ernest thought that he perceived some slight inclination, either from habit or otherwise, to entangle the count, and he looked anxiously for the coming of Pierre Morin. No one appeared, however, and Monsieur de Castelneau replied with perfect calmness, "The threat, sir, was vague; as I suppose is always the case where persons wish to excite greater apprehensions than the nature of the danger justifies; but from what he said, I was led to infer that he would accuse me of having had some share in the murder of an unhappy man named Fiteau, who was assassinated nineteen or twenty years ago."

"How long?" said the lieutenant-general. "I was not in office at the time. How long ago?"

The count paused. "I can tell you almost to a day," he said, after a moment's thought, "for I did not quit Paris till after the execution of the murderers. The assassination, now I think of it, must have been committed towards the latter end of April, in the year —."

"Good, good," replied the lieutenant-general, who had only asked the question in order to see whether the count would show any unwillingness to answer. "It was the end of April. I now recollect it. It was the end of April, nearly nineteen years ago come Lady-day. But, pray, what was the alternative, Monsieur de Castelneau? When men use threats of this kind, they always give those they menace some choice."

"It was simply, sir," replied the count, "that I should give him the hand of my adopted child, I having told him previously that she could never be his."

"The young lady has wealth, I presume?" said the lieutenant-general.

"Considerable wealth at present," replied the count; "and it is well known that I intend to bestow upon her all that the law will allow me to alienate, which, having no relations or heirs, is very nearly all that I possess."

"Very ample motive indeed," said the lieutenant-general. "This brings the accuser, if his charge prove false and malicious, immediately under the arm of the criminal law. I will tell you, Monsieur de Castelneau, fairly, that the accusation was made by this very Monsieur de Cajare last night. He has been beforehand with you, but may, perhaps, have overshot his mark, as many other very clever people do. However, I must now hear what you have to say regarding the period of the murder itself, and your own circumstances at the time. Speak freely, Monsieur de Castelneau, speak frankly, and it shall not turn against you."

"So much is it my intention to speak freely, sir," replied the count, "that I am ready to relate openly every circumstance affecting myself at that time; but I think that it would be better for some person to be here to take down what I say, that it may remain on record either for me or against me, as the case may be."

"As you please," replied the lieutenant-general, "as you please;" and, ringing a table-bell, he nodded his head to a person who entered, saying merely, "Monsieur la Caux."

The attendant retired, and a moment after a secretary appeared, seated himself at the table without speaking, and prepared to write. The count then began, and repeated the same statement he had made to Annette and Ernest de Nogent on the preceding day, without any other variation than the curtailment of several details

regarding his own motives and feelings, which to them he had dwelt upon at length. The lieutenant-general listened attentively to all that was said, and suffered the count to proceed to the end uninterrupted. He then asked suddenly, "Pray, Monsieur de Castelneau, how soon did you leave Paris after the day of the murder?"

"I remained, sir," replied the count, "till the trial had taken place and the murderers were executed."

"Pray, did you live openly as before," said the lieutenant-general, "or did you conceal yourself?"

"I lived as I had previously done for nearly a month," replied the count. "The fact is, that finding myself, as I have said, somewhat embarrassed for money, and many sudden calls coming in upon me, I sent the child that I had adopted out of Paris almost as soon as she had been consigned to my care, giving the nurse who was with her the greater part of the money that I had. I then retired to the precincts of the Temple, to shelter myself from personal inconvenience. There I continued to live without any farther concealment than before."

"This is all, then, that you have to depose!" said the lieutenant-general.

The count assented; and the chief officer of police ordered the declaration to be read over to him, and tendered it for his signature. The count found it accurate, and immediately signed it; and the lieutenant-general, then rising, said, "With your leave, Monsieur de Castelneau, we will now remove to another room, where we shall find your *party*,"* and several other persons who are concerned in this business, either as witnesses or otherwise. Be so kind as to follow me."

He then led the way through a door on his own right, and a long and narrow passage, closed by another door, which, on being opened, gave admission into a much larger chamber or hall, where was collected a considerable number of people, comprising five or six clerks, and as many archers and exempts. A large table was at the end near the door by which the lieutenant-general and those who accompanied him came in, and at one side of it was seated Pierre Morin. He was writing busily, and apparently attending to nothing that was passing in the room

* By this name the lieutenant-general intended to designate the accuser of the count, such being the legal expression.

except a few words which were addressed to him from time to time by a gentleman in the robe of an advocate who sat near, and who proved to be one of the commissaries of the Châtelet. At the farther side of the hall, which in length might be about forty feet, appeared the Baron de Cajare, with an archer on each side, and a number of other persons near. On his countenance appeared a stern look of angry defiance; and he gazed upon each person that entered the room with a flashing eye and frowning brow, as if he would willingly have risen from his chair to insult or assail them."

The opening of the door and the entering of the lieutenant-general of police caused Pierre Morin to lift his head, and he then rose and bowed low, to which salutation his superior officer returned a familiar inclination, saying, "Good-morning, Monsieur Morin; good-morning, Monsieur Rochebrune. Gaultier, place chairs for Monsieur de Castelneau and Monsieur de Nogent. Give me the declaration, La Caux. Be seated, Monsieur Morin: pray be seated, Monsieur Rochebrune. Now tell me, Morin, what is before us this morning?"

"Chiefly the case of the Count de Castelneau," replied Pierre Morin, "if you think fit to give it a preliminary examination here, in order to see whether there be grounds for sending it before other judges."

"*Coquin!*" cried the Baron de Cajare; but the lieutenant-general turned his eyes sternly upon him, and then replied,

"We will investigate it here, of course, first, Monsieur Morin, as it appears to me a mere matter of police in the present instance, Monsieur de Castelneau being an accuser as well as an accused, and charging the Baron de Cajare with using threats and menaces for illegal purposes. But it seems to me that you have put the gentleman under some restraint. What is the cause of that?"

"Why, sir," replied Pierre Morin, "though, in obedience to your order, which no one here is entitled to disobey, I have ordered Monsieur de Cajare to be brought hither, he is at present, I am sorry to say, a prisoner in the Châtelet. The police have long been looking after him as a notorious *pipeur*, who has taken in one half of the court. We have long known some of his habits, and more especially that he is in possession of a number of those Italian dice, which, though

solid and of a single piece, are lighter on one side than on the other. He was detected in the trick last night, at the house of Monsieur de Melun, where he won, by one trick or another, nearly two hundred thousand livres in a few hours. The dice were found up his sleeve, and the matter was quite clear."

"It is a lie!" said the voice of the Baron de Cajare; "the whole is false throughout."

"Silence!" exclaimed the lieutenant-general, sternly; "bring forward the Baron de Cajare. Stand there, sir, and, having first been sworn to speak the truth, make your declaration and charge against Monsieur de Castelneau, or any other person or persons, clearly, distinctly, and without prevarication."

"I shall do so, certainly," replied the Baron de Cajare, "although I see that the cause is predetermined, and that it is resolved not to do justice, whatever may be proved or disproved."

The face of the lieutenant-general assumed no very placable expression; but the Count de Castelneau, who perhaps felt that there really was some degree of prejudice existing against the baron, interfered, saying, "I beseech you, sir, do not suffer this gentleman's rash conduct to make you treat his testimony lightly. Should you do so, my exculpation will not be half so clear as if you give him patient and full attention."

"He shall be heard in his statement, Monsieur de Castelneau," replied the lieutenant-general, "and shall be punished for his insolence. However, it is our custom here to take into account the character of the accuser as well as the character of the accused; and, of course, when a swindler brings a charge against a man of reputation, we give it no great heed, unless other circumstances add weight to it. It is a natural conclusion that a rogue does not make a denunciation from a pure and simple love of justice, and we generally seek for some secret motive, such as revenge or cupidity; on the discovery of which, we deal in a very summary manner both with the charge and the accuser. Now, sir, make your declaration, and take care of what you say."

"My allegation is," replied the baron, "that in the month of April, in the year 17—, the person now called Count de Castelneau, but then known as the Abbé de Castelneau, did conspire to murder the jeweller and goldsmith Gaultier Fiteau, and kept watch at the door

while the actual deed was perpetrated by the Count de H—— and the Chevalier M——, who were executed for the offence; and I moreover declare that Pierre Morin, the person who bore witness against the two murderers, was well aware that the Abbé de Castelneau was so watching at the door, but that he has always concealed the fact; thus frustrating the ends of justice, from favour and affection towards the Count de Castelneau, because the said count had taken and adopted as his child the daughter of the said Pierre Morin; and this I will undertake to prove as soon as the count is put upon his trial."

"Will you swear to the truth of this declaration?" demanded the lieutenant-general; "and that it is made without deceit or fraud, and upon no motives of favour, enmity, or interest whatsoever? Give him the oath."

The oath was accordingly administered, and taken without scruple by the Baron de Cajare. The lieutenant-general then looked towards Pierre Morin, and said, "You hear, Monsieur Morin, that you are yourself a party accused in this affair."

"For which reason, sir," replied Pierre Morin, rising from his seat, "and because my testimony will be absolutely necessary in any proceedings regarding Monsieur de Castelneau, I will beseech you, in the first place, to examine into that part of the charge which affects me, that the credibility of the different witnesses in the business may be ascertained."

"I demand," exclaimed the Baron de Cajare, interrupting the reply of the lieutenant-general, "that the case be remitted to the proper judges."

"As soon as we are satisfied," said the lieutenant-general, fixing his eyes sternly upon him, "as soon as we are satisfied that there is a case at all. You are to understand, sir, that it is not allowed in France that every villain who chooses should put an honest man to the expense, shame, and pain of a public trial. Be silent, sir, and do not interrupt the proceedings of the court. We shall follow the course that you have proposed, Monsieur Morin; that is to say, we shall inquire into the credibility of all the witnesses who are likely to bear testimony in this affair, beginning with yourself; and, in the next place, we shall hear their evidence and declarations. We shall then consider the character and the credibility of the accuser, and ultimately, having

heard any explanations or defence which Monsieur de Castelneau may think fit to make, shall send the cause to be tried before the proper judges, or dismiss the charge altogether, as circumstances may require. What witness have you, Monsieur le Baron de Cajare, that Monsieur Morin, here present, did commit the offence of which you say he is guilty?"

"I will produce my witness at the trial of the Count de Castelneau," replied the Baron de Cajare.

"I might demand that he should be brought forward at once," said Pierre Morin; "but my exculpation is so easy, sir, that I will not take up your time by enforcing the common course of proceeding, and will at once justify myself. The act and the motive attributed to me by the Baron de Cajare are equally false. In the first place, the young lady known under the name of Mademoiselle de St. Morin is not my child, but the daughter of two persons of high rank and consideration—"

"The legitimate daughter!" exclaimed the Count de Castelneau, starting up.

"Silence," exclaimed the lieutenant-general; "Monsieur de Castelneau, do not interrupt the witness."

"The legitimate daughter," said Pierre Morin, "of two persons of high rank and consideration; and, next, in regard to the act of concealing anything I knew, I beg leave to call for the volume of reports and declarations for that year and month in which the murder of Fiteau was committed, and to request that my last declaration concerning this affair may be publicly read. Let the register be brought."

"It is here," said one of the secretaries; and, on a sign from the lieutenant-general, he proceeded to read.

"Pierre Morin, &c., &c., deposed, this — day of the month of April, 17—, that when he came out of the house of Gaultier Fiteau, shortly after the murder had been committed, he perceived a man standing, dressed, he thinks, in an ecclesiastical habit, and wearing a long, dark-coloured coat, whom he believes to be the Abbé de Castelneau. That the said man came up to him apparently in haste and fear, and seemed to mistake him for some one else, asking him, in a tone of great terror, 'What was that cry? Was the old man there? You have not killed him?' That the said Pierre Morin feels quite sure, from the manner in which this person spoke, that he did not know, and was not consenting to, the mur-

der beforehand; and that, when the said ecclesiastic found that he was mistaken in the person to whom he spoke, he fled as fast as possible; and that the witness, being convinced by his words that he was not a participant in the crime, did not pursue him."

"Is there any note upon the declaration in the hand of my late predecessor, Monsieur Bertin?" said the lieutenant-general; "if so, read it."

"There is a note, my lord," replied the secretary, "to this effect: 'No proof of guilt, but the contrary, against Monsieur de Castelneau; nevertheless, secret surveillance ordered.—N.B. With caution.'"

"I beg leave, sir," said Pierre Morin, "to rest upon this testimony, which cannot lie, as to my having done my duty in the affair, and I claim to be received as a witness, without imputation, in the case of Monsieur de Castelneau."

"Beyond all doubt," replied the lieutenant-general, "you are perfectly held clear of the charge against you. Now, Monsieur de Cajare, what is your evidence against Monsieur de Castelneau?"

"I will not bring it forward at present," replied the baron. "Upon the trial I will produce it. If you choose to dismiss the cause, you must."

"We will not dismiss the cause yet," said the lieutenant-general, with a very sinister sort of smile; "such accusations as these are of a very serious nature, Monsieur de Cajare; and the law says, 'in criminal matters the proof should be reciprocal,'* and what is brought against you must be investigated, as well as what you bring against others. As you will not call your witnesses, we must see to your own character, in order to ascertain what credit is to be given to you, and whether you have been moved by motives of justice and propriety or not."

The baron remained sullenly silent, and the lieutenant-general, turning to Pierre Morin, said, "We will now go into the charge against the baron, to see how far his unsupported word should lead us to give attention to his accusation. You say that he was arrested last night as a common swindler, in the house of the Count de Melun. Have you any depositions upon that affair?"

"One from the count, one from Monsieur de St. Paul,

* See the cause of the Duc d'Aiguillon and Monsieur de la Châlotais.

and one from Monsieur Michaud, gentlemen all present," replied Pierre Morin; "the substance of which is as follows: The count declares that, warned by the police, he watched the proceedings of Monsieur de Cajare for a quarter of an hour, while he was playing at hazard with Monsieur St. Paul, and that several times he saw him clearly, when he was about to throw, take up the dice provided by the house, and, while pretending to put them into the box, contrive to slip them up the sleeve of his coat, substituting others in their place; that he, the count, remarked, moreover, that generally, in passing the dice over to Monsieur St. Paul, the prisoner contrived to change them again, but could not always do so. The count farther declares, that, having taken Monsieur St. Paul's place at the table, and seeing the baron practise the same trick, he started up and caught his hand, while two of the dice were in the box and two up his sleeve; the baron then struggled to free himself, and the four dice now lying before you, sir, dropped to the ground. Messrs. St. Paul and Michaud confirm these facts, and, moreover, say that Monsieur de Cajare was never previously suspected, though his success was extraordinary, and though people wondered why he had lately given up playing piquet, and addicted himself entirely to hazard."

The lieutenant-general had held a copy of the depositions in his hand while Pierre Morin briefly recapitulated the substance; and, as soon as the commissary had done, he asked, "What say you to this, Monsieur de Cajare?"

"That it is a conspiracy," replied the Baron de Cajare, "planned by three knaves to escape paying the money they had fairly lost, and probably devised, as well as taken advantage of, by another knave here present, for the purpose of screening Monsieur de Castelnau by retorting the charge upon me. There were no dice up my sleeve: there were none but those in the box which I found in the house. When the Count de Melun upset the table and scattered the money I had won upon the floor, St. Paul threw down two other dice—I saw him—and then pretended to pick up four. Most likely those he did throw down were loaded, for certainly the persons present would omit nothing that might condemn me."

"These dice seem to me to be sound enough," said

the lieutenant-general, taking them up, and shaking them in the box with a sort of taste for the amusement which few Frenchmen of that day were without.

"Throw these two, sir," said Pierre Morin, pointing to the others, "and I will call them before they come out."

The lieutenant-general did so, with a smile. "Size quatre," cried Pierre Morin, and size quatre appeared upon the table.

The lieutenant-general threw more than once, and still the result was the same; nor can it be told how long he might have gone on in the sort of frivolous torture which he was inflicting upon the baron, had not Pierre Morin interfered, saying, "To put the matter beyond all doubt, however, sir, I ordered a domiciliary visit to be made this morning to the apartments of Monsieur de Cajare, and beg to present you, sir, with four-and-twenty pairs of fine Italian dice, with the aid of which you may throw any combinations you may think fit. These were taken from the private cabinet of the baron himself."

"Now, Monsieur de Cajare," said the lieutenant-general, "having ascertained the credibility of your own testimony, will you produce your witnesses, or will you withdraw your charge?"

"I will never withdraw my charge," replied the baron, fiercely, and he fixed his eyes, full of hatred, upon the Count de Castelneau. "No, no, he shall go down to the grave with the doubt upon his head. Men shall point at him, and shall say, 'That is the man who helped to murder Fiteau.' I know what suspicion can do; it can poison the food, and turn the cup to gall. It can sow the pillow with thorns, and make the heart ache forever: and such shall be his fate. I accuse him still of the deed. You have proof before you that he was watching at the door when the murder was committed; and now I tell you that the shopboy of the murdered man saw him go to that very spot in company with the two assassins who actually committed the murder. He himself has sworn to me that he beheld it. After this, let all the vain excuses of my bringing an unfounded charge, either from revenge or any other motive, be done away. The accusation I urge is reasonable and just, and no one has a right to attach to my conduct wrong motives, in the unjust manner in which they have been imputed to

me this day. I call upon that honest magistrate, Monsieur de Rochebrune, to defend me and to do me justice."

"I must say," said the Commissary Rochebrune, who had not yet spoken, "if Monsieur de Cajare can prove that such information has been communicated to him, it will greatly alter the question."

The lieutenant-general quietly pushed across to him a copy of the declaration which had been made that day by Monsieur de Castelneau; but Rochebrune, after having read it through, replied, "And the charge against Monsieur de Castelneau must be considered at an end. It cannot be sustained for a moment; but still, as far as affects Monsieur de Cajare, if he can prove that such an accusation has really been made to him, it not only must take away the suspicion of calumnious intent and interested motives, but must show that he only did his duty in making the charge; that he was moved by zeal for the public welfare; and that the state is, in fact, indebted to him for his conduct, and should suffer his behaviour on this occasion to be taken as a balance in some degree for any little fault he may have committed in regard to the dice."

The lieutenant-general looked at Pierre Morin, and the latter smiled, well knowing that, although Monsieur de Rochebrune, thus called upon to defend the baron, felt himself bound to do so, and did it with great skill, he was thoroughly convinced of the culpability of the person whose cause he advocated, and might, also, only plunge him into greater difficulties, if suffered to proceed in ignorance. Pierre Morin replied, therefore, "What my learned friend says, sir, is worthy of all attention; but can Monsieur de Cajare show that he has received such information? Where is this shopboy that he talks of? and what is his name? He may be merely an imaginary personage, for aught we know?"

"His name, sir, is Pierre Jean," replied the baron, "but where he is to be found I cannot tell. I thought he might have been met with in my own apartments in my father's house; but, from what has been said of the visit of the police, I take it for granted that he is no longer there."

"It is, of course, an absolute conclusion," said Pierre Morin, coolly, "that he should not be there now, unless he have escaped the eyes of the police; for if he saw them coming, there can be no doubt that he would run away; and if they found him there, no doubt can exist

they would bring him with them ; but, to relieve the mind of Monsieur de Cajare, I will tell him that we have got Master Pierre Jean quite safe. There is no fear of our being at a loss for his evidence, such as it is ; he was arrested last night coming out of a house in the Rue Tirechapes, and some very curious little documents found upon him, one of which is in the handwriting of Monsieur le Baron de Cajare to all appearance, and is signed with his name. This is it, I think ;" and he took a paper from the table. " But first let us have evidence of this having been found upon him : come forward, Monsieur Nicolas, the exempt : Did you search the person named Pierre Jean last night, and mark the articles found upon him ?"

" I did, sir," replied the exempt.

" Was this one of the things taken from him, and is that your mark ?" demanded the commissary.

The exempt again replied in the affirmative, and Pierre Morin went on, with his eyes upon the paper, saying, " By this curious agreement, monsieur, you will perceive that the Baron de Cajare agrees to pay to Pierre Jean the sum of five thousand louis, either if the Count de Castelneau be condemned for the murder of Gaultier Fiteau, or if he, the Baron de Cajare, marries Mademoiselle Annette de St. Morin. Moreover, the baron is to give the sum of ten thousand crowns to this worthy and respectable person in case it should be necessary to send the said Pierre Jean out of the country. The reasons are not stated, but you may divine them ; and—lest Monsieur Pierre Jean, who is somewhat in the habit of making mistakes, such as taking other people's property for his own, forgetting his own name and writing that of another man, and similar little errors, should commit any blunder in this delicate affair—it is agreed that he shall put himself entirely under the care and direction of the Baron de Cajare till either the Count de Castelneau is condemned and executed for the crime with which the two friends proposed to charge him, or till the baron be married to Mademoiselle de St. Morin. Now, sir, when it is shown that Monsieur de Cajare used these threats towards the count yesterday ; that the count refused him the hand of Mademoiselle de St. Morin in spite of the menaces ; that Monsieur de Cajare immediately made his declaration against the count ; that, at the same time, to get rid of my evidence, he made a false accusation against me ; that he is him-

self a sharper; that the man with whom he deals, and on whose testimony he rests, is stained with every crime, and has been punished for several infamous offences; when it is, moreover, proved, by his own handwriting to this unlawful and most criminal document, that he hires and bribes a notorious villain to bring a charge amounting to death against a respectable nobleman, who for twenty years has devoted himself to works of benevolence and charity—I say, sir, when all this is established, it is only fit and proper that the culprit before you should be sent immediately to take his trial and abide the punishment awarded by the law to such dark and infamous offences; unless, indeed, by great humility and contrition he moves your compassion, or from some other cause best known to your own wisdom, you think right to exercise the power intrusted to you by the law, and, judging the case in a summary manner, send him either to the galleys or the penal colonies in America. But perhaps,” he added, “in the first instance, you would like to see this bosom friend of Monsieur de Cajare, this pleasant companion of a gentleman in the first circles of Paris, colonel in a royal regiment, and—”

The Baron de Cajare could bear no more, but, darting from between the two archers, who had kept by his side when he advanced towards the table, he rushed towards Pierre Morin like a wild beast in its spring. Luckily, he was unarmed; and before Ernest de Nogen, starting forward with his hand upon his sword to defend the commissary, could reach the spot, the baron had passed the end of the table and was within grasp of Pierre Morin.

Several other persons hurried on at once to the same point, but no one was in time to interfere; and Pierre Morin sat calmly with a smile, which only enraged his adversary the more. When the baron was within a foot of him, however, he suddenly rose from his seat; and, notwithstanding the difference of age, with agility and presence of mind which went far beyond the energy and vehemence of his opponent's hatred, he eluded his first fierce attack by stepping a little on one side, then caught him by the collar as he was recovering himself, and threw him thundering back upon the pavement. The next moment he resumed his seat as tranquilly as if nothing had happened, and, turning to the lieutenant-general, he said with a laugh, “I think we

have not seen anything of this kind, sir, since Davot's business; but he was a strong man, and this is a baby. Bring in Pierre Jean: the man's head is cut; let him bleed, let him bleed, it will do him good."

Confounded, nearly stunned, with his whole senses bewildered, frustrated, humiliated, and despairing, the Baron de Cajare sat in the chair which they placed for him without proffering another word, while Pierre Jean was brought to the end of the table and interrogated regarding the events of the last few days.

Thé face of that personage was now remarkably pale, leaving a certain degree of redness which had settled in his nose to shine out through the dim mass of white around, like a beacon in a stormy sea. All his impudence, in truth, was gone; for, although he attempted once or twice to smile with his old air of careless freedom, yet that smile deviated into a painful grin whenever he tried it; and, to say truth, he seldom, if ever, ventured even to look around; for he had been now taught fully not only to taste the sorrows and discomforts of imprisonment, for those he had known sufficiently long before, but to feel to his very heart, which he had not hitherto felt, that he had committed great crimes, and was within the grasp of the most unsparing of all powers.

Had the Baron de Cajare looked in the villain's face for a moment, it would have been enough to take from him any little remnant of hope which he might have preserved; but the few first interrogatories that were spoken, and the answers that were given to them by Pierre Jean, showed him, as soon as he had in some degree recovered his senses, that his base confederate, as might well have been expected, was quite willing to betray him, now that it was clear he was unsuccessful. Pierre Jean, in fact, was ready to say anything that he was asked to say, for at that moment there was the spectre of a rope and gibbet before his eyes, from which he would have done anything on earth to escape. The baron had now no resource but silence; for he could reply to nothing that was said, and he felt that he had already uttered too much. The sensations in his bosom were at that moment a punishment wellnigh sufficient for the crimes that he had committed; but, of course, the retributive operation of the law could not rest there.

It is not necessary to dwell longer on a scene so painful and so humiliating to the character of man; for, in

truth, there is nothing degrading to our nature but wickedness in all its forms and aspects. When the examination of Pierre Jean was over, the lieutenant-general ordered him to be removed, and then, after consulting with Pierre Morin and Monsieur Rochebrune, he addressed the Count de Castelneau, saying, "Monsieur de Castelneau, the charge against you is not only dismissed, but you quit this place completely freed from all suspicion. The Baron de Cajare, on the contrary, having been charged by you with using threats, and calumniating you falsely for designs and purposes of his own, has not only been proved to my satisfaction guilty of that charge, but appears criminal of a most detestable conspiracy with the person named Pierre Jean, for the purpose of procuring your condemnation to death in the event of your persisting in the rejection of his suit to Mademoiselle de St. Morin. That he is guilty of barefaced swindling also is beyond a doubt; and if you choose to demand it, I will immediately hand him for trial to the proper judges. It is my own opinion that, under such circumstances, his life itself would be affected; but it seems to me that, for the honour and credit of the French nobility generally, we should deal with this case more quietly, and subject him to a less severe infliction, such as the law allows me to impose, without recourse to an ordinary trial. What say you, Monsieur de Castelneau, do you demand his trial or not?"

"By no means," replied the Count de Castelneau. "I have no revengeful feelings against him; deal with him as you think fit; but I ever hope he may be warned by what has just occurred never to seek his objects by such means as he has now employed!"

"He will never have the opportunity," replied the lieutenant-general; "for it is my intention immediately to ship him off for the colonies, and he too well knows the punishment of evasion to attempt to return to France."

"It matters not, it matters not," cried the Baron de Cajare, as he heard his sentence; "my time will yet come."

"For the gibbet or the wheel?" said Pierre Morin; but the baron did not hear or did not mark his words, and went on in a low tone, as if speaking to himself. "Ay, a new country, and a new name, and new objects, and new fortunes."

"And a new life, and a better spirit, and regained happiness, and a tranquil end," said Pierre Morin. "Follow such a course, sir, follow such a course, and there may be yet peace for you on earth and rest in Heaven!"

"Not if you be in the one or in the other," said the Baron de Cajare, shaking his clinched hand at him. "Hell would be Heaven to me if I could see you there."

"I trust you may enjoy it alone, sir," replied Pierre Morin, calmly: "you had better take him away, Nicolas: his case is over, I imagine, and he grows abusive."

"The first three years are to be passed in hard labour at the port," said the lieutenant-general, as the baron was hurried away by the exempt and the archers. The criminal turned round and glared upon him, but the potent magistrate who spoke only returned his glance with a look of contempt, and offered his hand to Monsieur de Castelneau with various expressions of courteous congratulations on the result of that day's proceedings. The count replied gravely, but politely, and took his leave. Ere he left the hall he paused to speak with Pierre Morin, his countenance relaxing into a warmer and brighter smile than usual as he did so.

"It is many years, Monsieur Morin," he said, "since we have met, and I find that you have done justice to me in my absence as well as to yourself. Accept my best thanks for both; for in your changed fortunes I have found my security, as well as in your true and honourable dealings with my name and character. You are one, I know, who will forgive my reference to your former situation; for an honourable man, who raises himself high by wise, good, and generous actions, renders a greater benefit to society than to himself."

"I am prouder, sir," replied the commissary, "of what I have been than of what I am. To have been a poor half-famished filigree-worker, and to have preserved my integrity in some circumstances of difficulty, I thank God is all my own; but to be here now, chief commissary of police, I owe to the bounty and kindness of others," and he turned with a bow to the lieutenant-general.

"To your own good conduct, Monsieur Morin," replied that officer.

"And to *your* discernment, sir," said the count; "but, Monsieur Morin, there is a subject on which I would

tain speak with you. May I ask you to visit me at Versailles?"

"I fear, sir, that can hardly be," replied Pierre Morin. "But you are about to return to Castelneau. I have business there ere long, and I will wait upon you as soon as the health of monseigneur the lieutenant-general replaces me in my proper state of insignificance. I trust that it may be soon. When I come, all that you wish to inquire into shall be fully explained."

"I have been patient for nearly twenty years," said the count; "will you be patient for as many weeks, Ernest?"

"I seek no explanations, my dear sir," replied Ernest; "none could add to my happiness at this moment!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOME months had passed since the events related in the preceding chapter. Various changes had taken place in the great world. In France, a king had died and another had succeeded, and a softer and more virtuous rule reigned in the court; when, in the evening of a sweet spring day, a carriage with six dusty horses stopped at the small but pretty inn of a village in the Limousin. A *chaise de poste* followed, and the landlord of the *auberge*, who seldom saw so much good company arrive at his humble abode, began to calculate how he should accommodate the whole; though, with the easy confidence of a Frenchman, he doubted not that the matter might well be managed. As soon as the carriage paused, the doors of both were opened, and a young gentleman, advancing with a quick step from the *chaise de poste*, approached the side of the other vehicle, and assisted the Count de Castelneau to alight.

A great change had come upon Monsieur de Castelneau; the few months that had passed seemed to have added many years to his age. His hair was now almost quite white, and he was much thinner than he had previously been. He appeared, indeed, to have been suffering from severe illness, and such was the case; for during several months after those scenes which he had borne with so much firmness, he had hung upon the very verge of the grave. Anxious for the fate of An-

nette, he had more than once pressed her eagerly, in moments when his own life was utterly despaired of, to give her hand at once to Ernest de Nogent; but Annette for once was disobedient, and Ernest did not doubt her affection, although she would not mingle joy with sorrow and sorrow with joy, suffering her bridal wreath, perhaps, to be covered with the veil of mourning.

To the Count de Castelneau, throughout his illness, Ernest showed all the tenderness and affection of a son, and he now saw fairer days and sweeter hopes appear, and looked forward to the arrival of the whole party at Castelneau as the moment that was at length to make him happy in the possession of her he loved. The count had borne the journey well so far as they had hitherto gone, and, proceeding with short stages from place to place, in fine weather and through beautiful scenes, though Ernest might be a little impatient for their arrival, yet the journey had been but as an excursion of pleasure; and bright dreams and dear imaginations had risen up in the hearts of the two lovers as they had gazed upon many an object of interest and many a lovely sight.

They were now within less than a day's journey from Castelneau, and a fairer spot could not have been chosen for the passing away of the few evening hours, while waiting for an event that was to make them all happy. The clean little inn, seated under its high wooded bank; the clear stream flowing on before the doors; the bridge covered with ivy, and shadowed by its group of spreading chestnuts in the fresh green of the spring; the tender blue of the sky; the soft white clouds that skimmed along low down in the air, as if seeking to sport with the branches of the trees; the sweet voice of the nightingale, just beginning to pour forth the rich song of his love, all spoke to the hearts of people wearied and sick of crowds and cities, and whispered hope and peace.

The count, though still not strong, looked gayer and brighter than he had done for many a day; and Annette, as she followed him from the carriage, and gave her hand to Ernest to assist her in descending, gazed in her lover's face with one of those looks of love, and hope, and tender confidence, that made his heart thrill with a longing to press her to his bosom at that moment, and pour forth again and again all the depth of his affection towards her.

"Come," said the count, after pausing and glancing round for a moment, "it wants yet an hour or two of night; we will sup here, my good host. Put me a chair under this tree, and let me drink in the calm fresh air."

All was done as he proposed; but, before supper could be spread upon the table, another carriage, coming at full speed along the road, dashed up, as if going on to a town some miles beyond. It was accompanied by several servants; and, though the equipage was plain, yet in form and appearance it was as handsome as the taste of that day permitted it to be. It had passed the spot where the count was seated, with Annette by his side and with Ernest de Nogent standing near, when suddenly a gentleman thrust his head forth from within, and called loudly to the postillions to stop. The horses were brought up in a moment, a lackey descending opened the door of the vehicle, and Pierre Morin alighting, approached the Count de Castelneau.

"I am on my way," he said, "to visit you, Monsieur de Castelneau; but I come not alone: there is a lady in that carriage who owes you much, and who is anxious to express her gratitude to you. Perhaps, mademoiselle," he continued, turning to Annette before the count could reply, "perhaps it might be better for you to speak with her for a moment first."

Annette had risen, and she now ran gladly forward to the side of the carriage, for the lady herself was in the act of alighting, and that graceful form and beautiful countenance were not to be mistaken for a moment. There were many people around; but the sensations which were in the bosom of that lady were too powerful to be restrained by any of the small considerations of ordinary life. Once more she cast her arms around Annette, once more she held her to her heart, once more her eyes gushed forth with tears, and deluged the fair neck on which she pressed her lips.

"My Annette," she murmured, "my dear, dear Annette; my child, my own sweet child!"

"I thought so!" replied Annette, in the same low tone, returning the embrace, and mingling her tears with her mother's. "I was sure it was—I felt it must be so!"

The count had arisen, with his eyes fixed upon the lady, and, passing Pierre Morin without reply, he advanced eagerly towards her. "Good Heaven!" he said,

as he came up, holding out his hand ; "Mademoiselle d'Argencerre! Now then, now: Who is this? Is she not—is she not your niece?"

The lady shook her head mournfully, and then again clasped Annette to her bosom, exclaiming, "No, ah no! She is my child!"

The count gazed in her face for a moment or two with a thousand questions struggling to his lips, but then the kindly and gentlemanly feelings of his nature overcame all other sensations. He took the lady's hand and led her towards a seat, saying, "I will not agitate you by seeking for farther information now, for you are too much moved already. Sit down by me, dear lady. You were one of those who were always kind to me, and defended me when others slighted or condemned me. I have ever loved you as a brother."

"And well may I love you as a sister," replied the lady, "for you have been a father to my child."

"It is strange," said the count, "most strange! but it matters not; let us all pause here for the night, and to-morrow go on to Castelneau together. Monsieur Morin, there is no one here who does not owe you much, for, by some strange fate, you have been mingled deeply with every event affecting us."

"I thank God, Monsieur de Castelneau," replied Pierre Morin, "that he has given me power to serve those I love, and show my gratitude to my benefactors. To this lady, to her sister, and to her father, I owed everything. He took me as a peasant boy, gave me education, and caused me to be instructed in a trade, which I chose for myself, and which promised to put me in possession of ease, if not of wealth. They—when I sometimes misused his goodness and his bounty towards me; when, with the careless thoughtlessness of youth, I spent the money which I should have reserved against the hour of need, they interceded for me, and obtained for me fresh assistance; till at length kindness overcame thoughtlessness, and I formed such resolutions as must have led me to ease in any pursuit. You may judge, therefore, Monsieur de Castelneau, how I have watched and prayed for such benefactors—"

"And how you have rewarded them," said the lady. "Nay, sit beside us, Monsieur Morin, sit beside us. You are a nobleman such as no king can make."

Annette's eyes—still ready from past agitation to

overflow at each new emotion, though they were no longer actually tearful—had been fixed for several moments upon the countenance of him she loved, who stood near, not mingling at all in the conversation, but neither unheeding it nor himself unnoticed; for more than once the lady had gazed upon him with a look of solemn interest, well knowing how entirely the happiness of her child depended upon him.

There was a pause at this moment, and Ernest instantly took advantage of it, crossing before the little group, and saying, as he approached the lady, "I have a blessing to ask, and I ask it fearlessly, for I am sure you are already aware of all that has been promised me here," and he took Annette's hand in his own.

"She is yours, Ernest, she is yours," replied the lady. "Your kind and excellent father, my best and noblest friend, is the only one, except this good gentleman, Monsieur Morin, acquainted with the sad secret of this dear child's birth. Let me compose my thoughts a little; let me think of how I shall tell my tale in the shortest words, and you shall all know it."

"It shall be told at Castelnau," said the count, with a smile. "We will repose and refresh ourselves to-night. We will depart early in the morning; we will sup to-morrow, in the gray evening, by the little cross where Ernest and Annette first met. There, dear lady, you shall relate the history, as if it were some old legend; and though the past which it recalls may be painful, the present by which you are surrounded must be sweet."

It was arranged as the count had proposed, and we may pass over the intervening hours. The journey had been more rapid than was expected; everything had been prepared beforehand by a messenger from the count: supper was spread on the green bank where Annette had been seated when the wolf attacked her, and the servants had been sent away, that no ears but those concerned might listen. It occupied a considerable time, and was broken by many a question and many an exclamation; but the substance was this:

The families of Argencerre and Castelneau had been united by frequent alliances through many generations, and, somewhat more than twenty years before the time to which we have now conducted the reader, a marriage had been proposed between the elder sister of the lady who spoke, the heiress of Argencerre, and Henry, the

son of the then Count de Castelneau. They had often met, and both the sisters were extremely beautiful ; but the eldest had felt in her bosom, from a very early period, the seeds of a disease which ultimately brought her to the grave. The impression was strong upon her mind that she was destined to die young, and she never suffered one worldly thought to take possession of her mind. She shrunk from every tie of earth ; and human love, in her own case, would have seemed to her a robbery of heaven. She grieved not, then, when she saw that the heart of the young Lord of Castelneau turned towards her sister rather than herself, and she speedily resolved upon her conduct. The family of Argencerre paid their annual visit to Castelneau, and there explanations took place which changed the views of all except Mademoiselle d'Argencerre herself. She told her determination to retire forever from the world, and to resign her rights and claims to her sister. The Count de Castelneau gladly consented that upon such conditions his son should marry the younger rather than the elder sister, thereby bringing the fortunes of both into the family of Castelneau. The Count d'Argencerre was not so well pleased, indeed, but he did not refuse his consent ; and the contract of marriage having been drawn up, in order to bind himself firmly, he signed it with the Count of Castelneau, though he himself was obliged to return to Paris before the union could be completed, to make the necessary arrangements regarding his estates. The young Lord of Castelneau, too, was obliged to join his regiment in a month, and in these circumstances it was agreed that the marriage of Louise and her lover should be delayed till after the campaign. The two ladies, however, remained at Castelneau, while their father proceeded to Paris. The contract was left in the hands of the young lord : nothing was wanting but his signature, with that of Louise and the benediction of the church, to complete the marriage ; and love triumphed over prudence. They signed the contract in secret : in secret the religious ceremony was performed, and Louise d'Argencerre became the wife of Henri de Castelneau a week or two before he took his departure for the army. To the grief and anxiety of his parting with his bride were added the unexpected pain and embarrassment of hearing that the Count d'Argencerre now sought to withdraw the consent he had given ; that a proposal had been made for the hand of Louise by a

lover allied to the blood royal of France; and that angry letters were passing between the two fathers on the subject. The young husband was obliged to go, however; and, ere he had left her for many days, his bride was carried away from Castelneau by her father, between whom and the old count broke forth a violent feud. The contract which both had signed was sought for, but could not be found: no suspicion was entertained of the private marriage, and the Count d'Argencerre returned to the capital, determined to give his daughter's hand to another. He could not do so, however, till the contract of marriage was formally annulled; and being called to command a division of the army on the Rhine, he wrote in a peremptory tone to the young Lord of Castelneau to send him back the contract, enclosing, at the same time, an authorization, and even injunction, from the old Count de Castelneau so to do. He himself marched with his regiment to Saare Louis; but the first letter that he there received announced to him the death of the young nobleman to whom his daughter's hand had been promised; and the heart of the Count d'Argencerre, which was, in truth, kind and affectionate, was painfully struck and touched. One of the fellow-officers of the young lord informed him that Henri de Castelneau having certainly exposed himself unnecessarily, had been killed evidently in consequence of such rashness; and the count was led to believe that his death might be owing to disappointment and despair. He became apprehensive of seeing his daughter; he remained with the army for months after his presence was no longer wanting; and he only returned when he heard that Louise had been extremely ill, and that the health of her elder sister was now failing rapidly.

In earlier and happier days, Louise had never imagined that the absence of her father could be anything but sorrowful to her; but circumstances had altered those feelings, and she had many an occasion to thank Heaven that he was away so long. The death of her husband, the birth of her child, even if the actual facts could have been hidden from her father, produced emotions and were succeeded by consequences which must have been discovered. Grief, and apprehension, and agony of mind wellnigh deprived her of her senses, and it was long ere her sister could teach her to put a needful guard upon her lips. At length, however, her father returned; and as he was prompt and decided, though

not, in reality, severe or unkind, on finding the health of both his children so greatly impaired, he caused them to be removed from Paris with a degree of unnecessary quickness, which agitated poor Louise much, and gave her no opportunity of communicating with the wife of good Pierre Morin, under whose charge her sister had placed the child. Agitation, apprehension, and sympathy for poor Louise had shaken Mademoiselle d'Argencerre, and accelerated the disease under which she suffered. She bore up well, indeed, for her sister's sake till the arrival of her father, but from that time her health rapidly declined, and in less than two months she was no more.

It was during this latter period that the events occurred which have been narrated in the commencement of this book, and which placed Annette under the charge and guidance of the Abbé de Castelneau. It may be sufficient to add that both Pierre Morin and his wife had deceived themselves in regard to the real mother of Annette. The rumour had at first been so strong that the elder sister was to be married to the young Lord of Castelneau, that it had even reached the ears of the good artisan and his family, as well as those of the Abbé de Castelneau; and when the filigree-worker was told vaguely of a secret marriage, and the absolute necessity of concealing the birth of the child, he naturally supposed that Mademoiselle d'Argencerre was the mother. When he heard of her death, he hesitated not, as we have shown, to confide the infant to the care of the Abbé de Castelneau, finding that the money which he had received was all spent, and that the poor child was likely to suffer the same penury which had fallen upon himself and his wife. He was soon undeceived, however, after the return of Annette's mother to Paris; but, far from reproaching him, she applauded what he had done, having known the abbé well in happier days, and having discovered, amid many failings and many errors, traits of a strong mind and a noble heart. Directed by her, Pierre Morin made inquiries into the circumstances of Monsieur de Castelneau; and she it was who furnished him secretly with the means of paying his most pressing debts and quitting the capital.

"And now, my dear friend and relation," she said, laying her hand upon that of the count, "again accept my thanks, my deepest and most heartfelt thanks, for

the care you have taken of this beloved child, and for the wisdom you have shown in her education. I must henceforth claim my rank as Countess of Castelneau; but Annette, so long as you live, will never demand anything but the dear name of your adopted daughter. Till the death of the late king, of which event you, of course, have heard, I ventured not to avow my marriage, because he had strongly interested himself in one who had sought a hand which could not be given to him, and had resented my refusal so vehemently that he forbade my presence at the court. A week ago, however, I presented myself to the gentle and kind-hearted monarch who now rules over us. I showed him the contract, which had lain concealed for many years in my chamber at Castelneau; and I produced the register of the marriage, which had been procured for me by my good friend Monsieur Morin here. The whole was at once recognised as legal by the king, and I hastened towards this place with all speed, to set the mind of every one at rest. Say, Annette, say, my dear child, whether you do not feel as I do, and whether it will not be joy to you to see Monsieur de Castelneau, who has been a father to you, still acting as a father to all around him?"

"My dear lady," replied the Count de Castelneau, "I never was ambitious; I never was avaricious; I must not say that I never was unjust; for every man who acts ill and unwisely in life is doubly unjust to others and to himself. But I cannot retain what is not my own; these fair lands and lordships belong to my Annette. They are hers, not mine, and most willingly—"

Annette rose up from her seat, and, gliding quietly up to him, dropped upon her knees and laid her hands on his, looking up in his face with a glance of tenderness and affection unspeakable. Ernest de Nogent advanced likewise, and bent one knee beside her, saying, "We entreat you, we beseech you, never mention such a thing again."

The count grasped their hands in his, and lifted his eyes towards heaven as if thanking God for some intense delight.

At that instant, however, as if some wild and sudden emotion had seized him, he started up, cast himself between Annette and the wood on the opposite side of the water, and threw his arms partly over her, partly round Ernest. At the very same instant there was the loud

and ringing report of a carbine. The count staggered forward, reeled up again, and fell back upon the grass. Annette clasped her hands, gazing almost frantic in his face ; but the sword of Ernest de Nogent sprang from the sheath in an instant ; with one bound he was across the stream, and ere Pierre Morin could follow, his blade was crossed with that of the Baron de Cajare. Stern and deadly enmity was in both their faces, and the play of their weapons one against the other seemed like the quick glances of the lightning.

Pierre Morin paused, for they were two men not to be separated with life ; and at the fifth pass the sword of the Baron de Cajare glided over the shoulder of Ernest de Nogent, while Ernest's hilt struck against his adversary's side, and the bright blade shone out under his left arm.

Ernest de Nogent shook him from his weapon, and cast him back upon the ground, exclaiming, "Base villain, thou wilt do no more wrong."

"Curses ! curses ! curses upon you !" murmured the Baron de Cajare ; and, with those words upon his lips, the fierce eyes lost their eagerness and swam in death.

Ernest gazed upon him only for a moment, thrusting his sword back into the sheath ; and, while Pierre Morin moralized in his peculiar manner, saying, "This is the consequence of kings interfering with the punishment of criminals," the young gentleman sprang across the stream again, and joined the horrified group around the Count de Castelneau.

He slightly raised the dying nobleman in his arms, and the count recognised and thanked him by a pressure of the hand ; but life was ebbing fast. "It is over, Ernest," he said, in a low voice. "Annette, dear child, I am happy, most happy. I have died for thee, dear one, I have died to save thee. Let me lean my eyes upon thy shoulder ; there they will close in joy, to open again, I trust, on my Redeemer in heaven."

He bent his brow ; it rested on Annette's bosom ; the weight became heavier and more heavy ; his grasp relaxed upon the hand of Ernest de Nogent, and the young nobleman gently laid the corpse back upon the grass.

THE END.

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